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Damage Control:
Black Women's Visual Resistance in Brazil and Beyond

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Damage Control:
Black Women's Visual Resistance in Brazil and Beyond

by

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Dedication

To my beloved late aunt Aundra Thornton.

Abstract

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Jezebels, Mammies, and Matriarchs… These labels signify racialized and gendered social constructions that transnationally pervade the lives of black women. By contextualizing black women's artwork as visual responses to social subjugation and objectification, one can discern the (literal) materialization of black feminist epistemology through artistic production and the aesthetic concerns that drive expressive work. This thesis therefore analyzes black Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino's work as a visual form of resistance to three major "controlling images" of black women in Brazil as sexually promiscuous, domestic laborers, and unfit mothers. Her work represents not only the Brazilian black woman's experience; it broadens and deepens the conversation on black women's art in Africa and its diasporas, where similar stereotypes exist. Several

of Paulino's personal statements and artworks address subjects that parallel those made by black women artists--María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Lorna Simpson, Zanele Muholi, and Wangechi Mutu, to name a few--whose artwork is also considered in this paper. Articulated to an international community of black women artists, Paulino's artwork contributes to the development of a space in art history for the representation of black Brazilian women that enriches understandings of other established areas, be they social, artistic, medical, sexual, cultural, political or economical.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

Jezebels, Mammies, and Matriarchs… These labels signify racialized and gendered social constructions that transnationally pervade the lives of black women. By contextualizing black women's artwork as visual responses to social subjugation and objectification, one can discern the (literal) materialization of black feminist epistemology through artistic production and the aesthetic concerns that drive expressive work. This paper thus analyzes Rosana Paulino's artwork as a visual form of resistance to three major controlling images of black women in Brazil as sexually promiscuous, domestic laborers, and unfit mothers. Controlling images, as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins, are gendered, racialized depictions within popular culture and scholarship that serve to reinforce social hierarchies within a given cultural context. They function in various ways to legitimize and sustain social inequities and exploitation, rendering black women vulnerable on various levels in not only the U.S., but also Brazil. Viewed as a mode of cultural and political activism, Paulino's art simultaneously demystifies the local context of black Brazilian women and broadens the global context of black women artists. Through her visual interrogation of stereotypical conceptions and her representation of black women's social histories and realities, her artmaking becomes an act of reclamation that validates her own experiences and those of other black Brazilian women as well.

Paulino's drawings, prints, installations, and sculptures employ a range of techniques and materials to address a wealth of social matters and themes related to

controlling images. She references sexual exploitation, forced labor, invisibility, violence, among other concerns, which many black women face on a daily basis in Brazil and elsewhere. Her work thus represents not only the Brazilian black woman's experience; it broadens and deepens the conversation on black women's art in Africa and its diasporas, where similar stereotypes exist. In fact, several of Paulino's personal statements and artworks address subjects that parallel those made by black women artists of the U.S., South Africa, Cuba, and other nations. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Lorna Simpson, Zanele Muholi, and Wangechi Mutu, to name a few, live and work in various cities, speak different languages and descend from various cultures, yet they frequently explore themes similar to those represented in Paulino's artworks. Although they present diverse responses to the images and ideologies that dominant cultures use to control black women, Stuart Hall's theory of articulation proves useful in thinking about their linkage.

Hall describes articulation as an inadvertent joining of distinct units due to historical circumstances. It is

> the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage, which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time…, a linkage between [an] articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.[1]

In diasporas, different groups of people connect in unforeseen, complex ways due to more than their dispersal from an assumed homeland. Various social, economic, and religious reasons, among others, connect, separate and reconnect them. As a group,

[1] Hall qtd in Grossberg *On Postmodernism*, 53,

Paulino and many black women artists relate to each other in different ways, not because of supposedly essential aspects of black womanhood. Further, these black female artists can be and have been linked to countless other non-black and non-female artists—due to style, theory, content, technique, and media, among other reasons—in exhibitions and texts.

Beyond the expansion of discourse on black women's art in general, Paulino's presence calls for the advancement of research into an underrepresented area within the field. Limited literature, scholarly or otherwise, exists on black Brazilian women artists, and this limited exposure reflects their status in their own nation and beyond. Articulated to an international community of black women artists, Paulino's artwork contributes to the development of a space in art history for the representation of black Brazilian women.

In this examination, I hope to give new insights into black women's contributions to the visual arts, as Paulino's artwork and the circumstances it reflects provide a relatively new area of investigation in art history and visual culture. Her work addresses "high" and "low" culture, experience and theory, essentialism and identity, location and positionality, and other topics that are central to the formulation of black feminist thought, as they pertain to Brazil. Nonetheless, by her visual resistance to Brazil's "controlling images," Rosana Paulino contributes to their denouncement worldwide.

Chapter One: Stripped: Exposing Somatic Stereotypes in Black Women's Art

Modern artists of the U.S. have traditionally avoided depictions of the nude black female in contrast to such celebrated Brazilian painters as Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, Tarsila do Amaral, Lasar Segall and Candido Portinari, who have brazenly exposed black female figures throughout their oeuvres.2 These artists' approach to their subject as primitive, sensual creatures simultaneously makes reference to and reinforces views that obscure, devalue and jeopardize black women. In comparison to black men, Frieda High has noted, "in European discourse at theoretical and practical levels, the specificity of black women's entire being [stimulates] a particular difference in the way that their victimization was and continues to occur in mythical and physical realms."3

Resisting this fabrication of the "Jezebel," Paulino and several black women artists, such as Sonia Boyce, Renee Green, Lorna Simpson and Alison Saar, interrogate the socio-cultural meanings and consequences of the stereotype, which reduces its subjects "to creatures that are all body, without mind or soul."4 They thus reconsider the views of physical features, particularly hair, in the cultural imagination as curiosities and signifiers of physical or sexual aberrance. In their turn, they call into question Eurocentric standards of beauty, femininity and womanhood. Along with these criteria, the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality in black women's subjugation render them highly vulnerable to societal disrespect or sexual exploitation and assault, treatment

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[2] Collins, *The Art*, 38.
[3] High, *An Interwoven Framework*, 201.
[4] Dorothy *Hammond* and Alta *Jablow* quoted in Harris, *Memories*, 33.

similar to that of the slavery era. As noted in her discussion of the "culture of dissemblance," Darlene Clark Hine avers, "virtually every known nineteenth-century female slave narrative contains a reference to, at some juncture, the ever-present threat and reality of rape."5 For many black women these conditions persist today, largely due to notions that sexual acts are never against their will.6 In view of these circumstances, the following discussion explores works by Rosana Paulino and others that question the validity of stereotypes of black women's sexuality and physicality within and outside Brazil and their historical role in works by Di Cavalcanti, Amaral, and other celebrated artists.

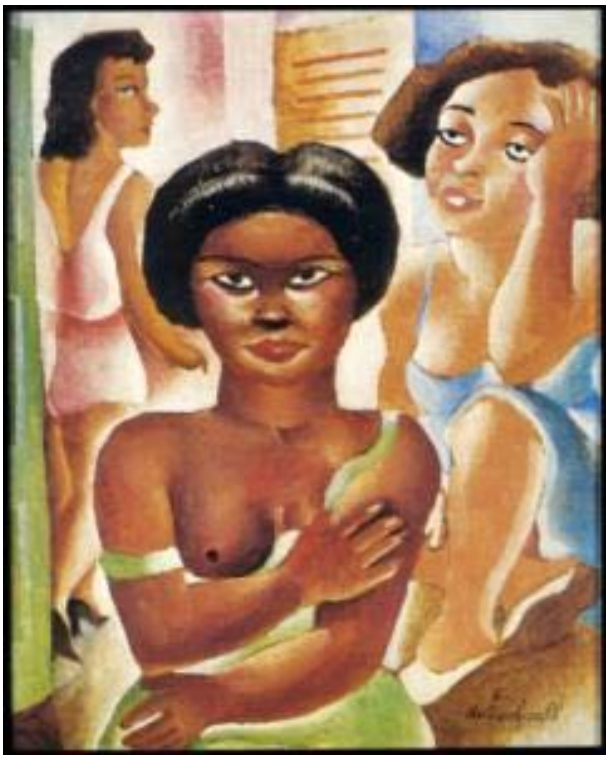

Figure 1: Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, *Mulatas*, 1927

5 Hine, *Hine Sight*, 38.
6 Crenshaw, *Mapping*, 368-74 and Kennedy, *Victim Race*.

Emiliano Di Cavalcanti became famous for his numerous paintings of mulatas, which he created throughout his long career.[7] In almost all of these images, the subjects stare directly at the viewer with heavy "bedroom" eyes—often while in a state of undress—suggestively alluding to their (or Di Cavalcanti's) purposes. In his painting *Mulatas* from 1927 and *Samba* from 1925, Di Cavalcanti places figures of black women directly in the center of the plane, as the tops of their garments fall off their shoulders, exposing their breasts. The two paintings exhibit remarkably similar poses for the central figures, in addition to the aforementioned eye contact and "wardrobe malfunction." Their right arms lay across their chests (to either hold up or pull down the sleeves), as their right arms rest on a hip. Yet, they differ in settings. *Mulatas* suggests the interior of a brothel. Two other women appear to be waiting idly for a customer in the background. The figure on the right wears a nightgown and rests her head on her hands, while the other, dressed in lingerie and high heels, looks back and towards the viewer.

[7] *Mulata* is a mixed-race woman, partially of African descent, one of many appellations for the black woman in Brazil. See Santos, *Brazilian Black Women's NGOs*, 100, and 414. Also, see Soong for a list of the 134 terms Brazilians used to describe themselves in a 1976 study conducted by Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

Figure 2: Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, *Samba*, 1925

Conversely, *Samba* is a scene from a party or festival: dancers, a guitarist and onlookers populate the image. To elicit further sensuality, the artist inserts a topless black female that flanks the central figure on her right. In a similar fashion to the prostitutes in *Mulatas*, she wears only a loosely tied sheet of white cloth around her hips along with high heels. In the hands of Di Cavalcanti, black women appear overtly sexual and assertively so. Whereas white male European artists, such as Edouard Manet and Pablo Picasso, employed black bodies and cultural forms as peripheral indicators of sexuality, Di Cavalcanti leaves little room for subtext. Similar to the Jezebel stereotype, he foregoes

nuance for explicitness.8 In doing so, the figures imbue the paintings with lustfulness, suggesting that sexuality is what defines mulatas[9].

This treatment of Di Cavalcanti's subjects speaks to long-held notions of black women's sexuality in Brazilian social thought. As is the case in most of the Americas, Brazilian notions of the hypersexual black woman or Jezebel stereotype originated during slavery "when white slave owners exercised almost complete control over black women's sexuality."10 The stereotype also tends to denote a black or "mixed-race woman with more European features, such as thin lips, straight hair, and a slender nose."[11] However, it was in no way restricted to these criteria, as slave owners characterized female slaves, in general, as hypersexual savages who prostitute themselves for monetary or material gain.12 The formulation of this character was indispensible for white society, as it justified the sexual exploitation of black women and reinforced social, political and economical hierarchies.13 Consequently, through pervasive reiteration, the black female became the personification of an abstraction of reality. In other words, enforced slave functions—that is, rape, to satisfy a slave owner's sexual desires or supply him with more slaves—became social expectations. Indeed, Gilberto Freyre, Brazil's renowned social

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[8] The Jezebel stereotype figures black women as lascivious, innately promiscuous, even predatory, by nature.

[9]The term "mulata" is derived from the word mule, an animal of hybrid origin. In Brazil, it has historically denoted an Afro-descendant woman with medium to light brown skin, European facial features, and straight hair texture, in general. The term is now largely frowned upon, especially by Afro-Brazilians, as it is recalls not only its derogatory hybrid-mule origin, but is also associated with the sexualized showgirl persona that Brazil exports to international audiences to encourage (cultural and sexual) tourism.

[10] West, *Mammy*.

[11] ibid.

[12] hooks, *Black Looks*, 62.

[13] West, *Mammy* and hooks, *Ain't*, 32-33.

scientist and purveyor of the myth of racial democracy, once reminisced about "the mulatto girl who picked chiggers off us and tickled our feet. And the Jezebel who initiated us in physical love on a squeaking canvas cot, making us feel real manhood for the first time."14

Freyre's quote concretizes the Jezebel myth in the physical form of the mulata. Over seventy years later, the term mulata remains synonymous with prostitute.15 For evidence of this association, one need not look much further than Carnival, Brazil's famous nationwide celebration. Lyrics to some of the most popular songs in national history contain several degrading references to black women and are sung by the masses every year. For instance, "O Teu Cabelo Não Nega" ("Your Hair Can't Deny It") has been "sung at virtually every carnival ball for the last fifty years [and is] one of the ten greatest popular songs ever written in the country."[16] The lyrics–

O teu cabelo não nega, mulata	Your hair can't deny it, mulata
Porque és mulata na cor	Because you're the color of a mulata
Mas como a cor não pega, mulata	But since color doesn't rub off, mulata
Mulata, quero o teu amor	Mulata, I want your love–

insinuate that although the black female subject has straight(ened) hair, the brown color of her skin cannot "rub off." 17 Because she cannot conceal or remove her African heritage, she must resign to be a sexual object, to the desire of the song's protagonist,

14 Freyre, *Casa Grande*, 289. The racial democracy myth claims Brazil is a racially egalitarian nation, namely due to the prevalence of miscegenation that has produced a large mestiço (mixed-race) population. In addition, Freyre did not coin the term racial democracy, but he popularized the notion of Brazil as a racial egalitarian nation. Also, his use of "us" and "our" is notable, as it suggests his audience, i.e. Brazilian citizenry, is a white heterosexual man.

15 Caldwell, *Negras*, 60.

16 Carvalho, *The Multiplicity*, 270.

17 Ibid. The composers of the song are Lamartine Babo, João Valenca and Raul Valenca.

presumably a white male. The popularity of “O Teu Cabelo” demonstrates how ingrained is the degraded position of women of African descent. This example effectively demonstrates the insensitivity of a long-held national tradition that garners much of its popularity at the expense of black women’s bodies and respect.

In addition to songs, Brazilian businesses regularly produce and export exploitative images of scantily clad black women to not only popularize the festival, but also to entice foreigners and encourage sexual tourism. Following the tsunami that struck Thailand in 2004, Brazil gained much more business in this sector, which unfortunately lures many poor black women to prostitution as a way to earn money.[18] This development also reinforces sexualized notions of black women on a global scale that includes black men in the U.S. As their income increases, they have more opportunities to travel and Brazilian tourism companies increasingly target them.

In light of popular cultural imagery, black males in the U.S. have demonstrated preference for women that historian Tiffany Patterson terms “Ascriptive Mulattas” and describes as “either fair-skinned, ethnically-mixed, or of indeterminate ethnic/racial origins, with long, straight, or curly hair.”[19] This category includes women of African Diasporas, especially Puerto Rico and Brazil. In fact, there are message boards and web groups for "African American Men & Brazilian Women," complete with tips on how to "handle" the exotic(ized) Brazilian woman.[20] Widespread reductive notions of black Brazilian women suggest that the major underlying aesthetic of Di Cavalcanti’s painting

[18] Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up*, 44-45.
[19] Ibid. 27, 32.
[20] Ibid., 44-45.

of mulatas is the “pleasure principle… [That is,] a conduit of power and subjection by which subjects appear to consent to their oppression.”21 The mulatas appear content and complicit in their objectification, while any references to contributing circumstances are absent. Di Cavalcanti's suggestion of their pleasure is thus “ultimately a political problem, inseparable from the lived experience of psychic pain.”22

FASHION(ING) MODELS

Seemingly aware of the pretense of Di Cavalcanti's imagery, in a series of drawings entitled *Models* (1996-98), Rosana Paulino depicts two crudely drawn figures with coiffed hair, jewelry and clutch wallets, which ironically replace the clutch of their hands. However, the focal points of the composition are the stark blood-red vaginal incisions, which precisely match the color of their lipstick. On the one hand, Paulino seems to visualize a critique of “gold-diggers” or opportunistic women that rely only on beauty or sexuality for socio-economic advancement. On the other, Paulino demonstrates sympathy for her subjects. The tenuous lines of her drawing recall the psychologically disturbed drawings of Egon Schiele, alluding to internal fragility or the aforementioned psychic pain, while their light brown tone suggests they represent bi-racial women, or rather socio-historical constructions of them in both the U.S. and Latin America. In U.S. film and literature, the bi-racial or “almost white, black woman, [is] tragically sexual.”23 She

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21 Mercer, *Busy*, 51.
22 Ibid., 51.
23 hooks, *Black Looks*, 74. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting also discusses this trope in *Pimps Up*, 27-28,

is portrayed as physically attractive due to her Euro-ethnic features, but also as a sex object due to her African heritage. She is often depicted in pursuit of marriage to a white man only to be rejected or even killed for stepping out of her "place." In Brazilian popular thought, however, "the mythical mulata does not want marriage or other symbols of respect; she is content to be considered not 'wife-able' and to be 'consumed' instead."24 Consequently, this misguided notion gives men permission to exploit black women believed to be complicit in their own devaluation.

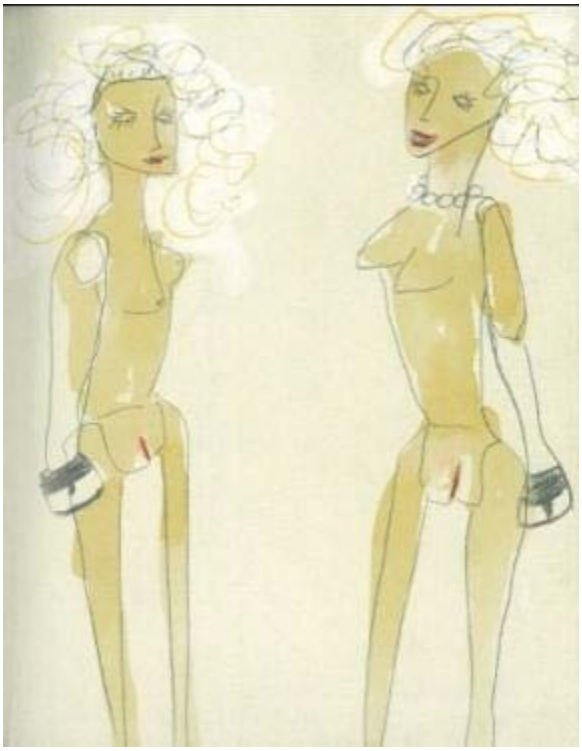

Figure 3: Rosana Paulino, *Models*, 1996-98

The figures of the models also speak to the impossibility of the "Jezebel" or "sensual mulata," as they resemble those of dolls, particularly by their rigid hip joints.

[24] Gilliam, *The Brazilian Mulata*, 64.

Nonetheless, this myth endures, for example, in Hollywood films. Producers continue to cast black women as caricatures of themselves, exaggerating their sexuality and orality. The movie industry profits off these characterizations, which it routinely justifies as reflections of "real life," despite the furtive protests of organizations that represent black women in real life.25 The industry's insistence on one-dimensional roles of black women has larger implications, such as the underachievement and unemployment of black actresses. Moreover, these portrayals potentially brainwash filmgoers who would exit theatres viewing black women in the same manner in which they were depicted onscreen. In rendering her figures as overtly artificial constructs, Paulino indicates the artificiality of hypersexual constructs of black women.

THE PRESENCE OF AN ABSENCE

In light of those representations and others that metaphorically mask black women's corporeality, Rosana Paulino, Lorna Simpson, Nandipha Mntambo and Renee Stout created works that propose new readings of their subjects. Paulino produced a pair of linocuts titled *Self Portrait with African Mask I (Amaral)* and *Self Portrait with African Mask II (Volpi)* (both 1998). They clearly refer to two renowned Brazilian artists, Tarsila do Amaral and Alfredo Volpi, and feature their signature motifs: Amaral's large banana leaves and Volpi's bandeirinhas or small flags, which create a celebratory atmosphere in Brazil. In Paulino's image, however, they contribute to a melancholic tone. They

25 Freydberg, *Sapphires*, 226.

emphasize her figure's hunched-over stance and draw the composition downward, as does the position of Paulino's crossed arms, which mirrors the down-arrow shape of the mask.

Figure 4: Rosana Paulino, *Self Portrait with African Mask I (Amaral)*, 1998

Figure 5: Rosana Paulino, *Self Portrait with African Mask II (Volpi),* 1998

Paulino has explained that in this image she attempted "to evoke the idea of a martyr, a wounded Saint Sebastian through this closed position."26 Interestingly, historical paintings of Saint Sebastian usually depict him in a state of victimization with his arms over his head or behind his back. His positioning also often has an open, sensual aspect that aestheticizes his misfortune. Paulino's divergence from these models might indicate her gender or sexual psychology. The portrait that refers to male artist Volpi depicts Paulino in a protective, guarded position, whereas, the first self-portrait, which refers to a female artist, shows Paulino in an upright position with a fully exposed torso.

[26] Cleveland, *New Center*, 262

Figure 6: Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian*, c. 1616

Figure 7: Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Sebastian*, c. 1614

Nonetheless, Paulino's evocation of Saint Sebastian—the persecuted Christian martyr who is said to have been shot with arrows and beaten to death because of his religious beliefs—recalls ethnographic subjects from the nineteenth-century. In the (in)famous slave daguerreotypes by J. T. Zealy, "the subject's clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded, or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor." 27 Biologist Louis Agassiz commissioned and used the portraits to validate his polygenic theories of the subjects' biological inferiority. The three-quarter length and nude torsos of Paulino's portraits' further emphasizes the prints' resemblance to Zealy's and other's ethnographic portraits. However, the mask in her images disrupts earlier photographers' "phrenological approach" by covering Paulino's head.28 Thus, it becomes a protective shield, along with her arms and hands, against implied past inspections.

[27] Wallis, *Black Bodies*, 105-06. Louis Agassiz commissioned J. T. Zealy to photograph black slaves from South Carolina in 1850. Brian Wallis has noted that in the second series portraits were "tightly focused, showing the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women. This series adhered to a phrenological approach, emphasizing the character and shape of the head."
[28] Wallis, *Black Bodies*, 105.

Figure 8: J. T. Zealy, *Delia,* 1850

Figure 9: E. Thiesson, *Native Woman of Sofala, Mozambique,* 1845

The mask serves similar purposes in the first self-portrait, in which Paulino appropriates Amaral's signature foliage that often adorns depictions of dark-skinned female nudes and thereby consign the subjects to the realm of nature or wildlife. Despite the absence of leaves, Amaral's famous painting, *A Negra* (*The Black Woman*) from 1923, also assigns the black female to a particular place and role.

Figure 10: Tarsila do Amaral, *A Negra*, 1923

The work "celebrates the black 'nanny' as the source of nourishment and…the backbone of [Brazilian] society," a dubious distinction.29 Amaral pays homage by focusing on the large exposed breast, or the so-called "source of nourishment," of a nude black female figure seated with crossed legs, an atypical pose for a female nude and one

[29] Damian, *Tarsila*, 4.

more suitable for a child. Outfitted with distorted, mask-like facial features, the black female in Amaral's painting appears obscured and fixed within the frame and by ahistorical notions of Africa. As a loaded cultural icon that represents alterity in Brazilian society, *A Negra*'s rounded voluptuous form is in sharp contrast to her modern angular background. In effect, the black woman contrasts with or remains outside modern times. The work thus points toward a view of the black female figure as masked/invisible, naked/powerless and unclothed/uncivilized, which Paulino critically assesses in her print.

As in the second self-portrait, in *Self Portrait I*, Paulino utilizes the African mask as a tool for introspection. The mask, which is traditionally a vehicle for transformation in African cultures, initially appears to do the opposite in both images. On the one hand, it conceals Paulino's individual appearance and expression. The prints are thus interpellations, or Paulino's imaginings of how Volpi and Amaral would have depicted her. On the other hand, because of the masks' concealment, Paulino's self-portraits do not visualize or even resemble her actual physicality. They evoke Descartes' contention that "very often, in order to be more perfect qua images, and to represent object[s] better, it is necessary for the [artwork] not to resemble [them]."30 Instead of depicting her visage, Paulino visualizes her introspection and "explores the value of taking on or assuming an 'African' identity, which is symbolized by the mask. This "Africanness' is not an innate part of her identity, but something she can put on and take off."31 The masking of Paulino's self-portrait therefore formally approximates, yet conceptually counters,

30 René Descartes quoted in Snyder, *Picturing*, 499.
31 Cleveland, *New Center*, 262.

Amaral's painting, the chronological aspects of which point to further and more famous usages of African masks in art history.

Amaral painted *A Negra* during one of her stays in France, where she socialized with Pablo Picasso, among other modern masters.[32] In the early 1900s, African art was in vogue among European artists, who often incorporated its stylistic elements into their paintings and sculpture. Arguably, the most celebrated example of this practice is Pablo Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from 1907. Originally titled *Le Bordel d'Avignon* (*The Brothel of Avignon*), the large-scale painting features five prostitutes, which bear dark African masks or angular mask-like features. In this instance, when placed on white female figures, the masks work to emphasize the moral and sexual aberrance of the subjects and denote them as figurative "others" to their viewers.

Figure 11: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907

[32] Schwartz, *Literature*, 4.

In seeming response to the decreased morality and heightened sexuality of African figures, such as that visualized by Picasso, Lorna Simpson separates the elements of *Les Demoiselles*—women and masks—and turns their backs to the viewer in her 1991 photograph *Tense*. The gesture recalls and rejects histories of African women and artifacts placed on display as curiosities. Moreover, Simpson asks the viewer to "assess differences between her own constructed representation and the viewer's conventional reading of each image."33 She proposes an alternate view literally and figuratively. With the viewer "placed 'behind the scenes'" and in a rare position to see the back of the mask, Simpson emphasizes the objects' utilitarian and performative dimensions.34 "There is always another side" to the (hi)story and the mask, which is meant to be worn, rather than placed on display like a fetish.35

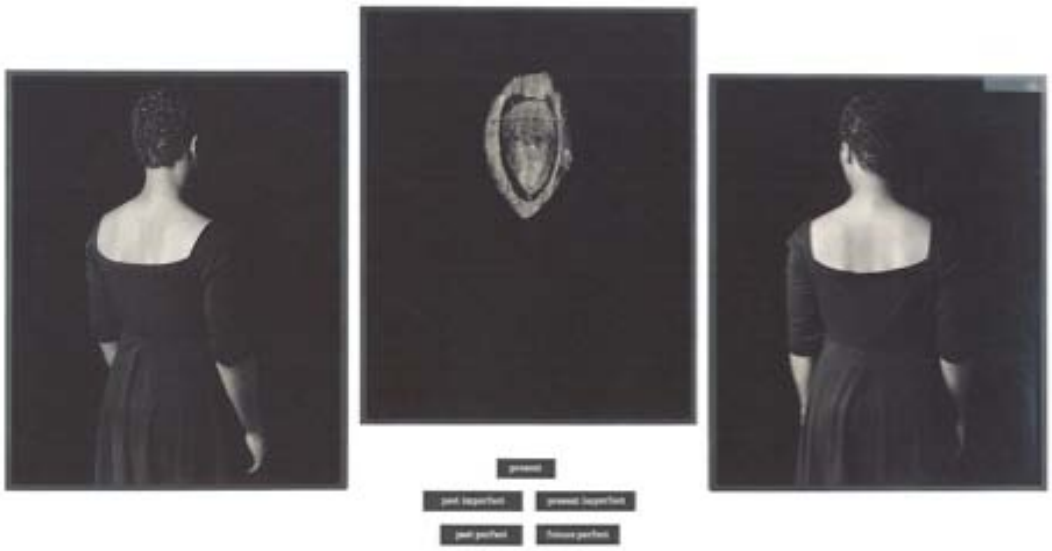

Figure 12: Lorna Simpson, *Tense*, 1991

33 Wright, *Back Talk*, 410.
34 Faust, *New York*, 80.
35 Ibid.

Tense also redresses the "ahistoricization" of African cultures and black women's experience in its text. "Present / past imperfect / present imperfect / past perfect / future perfect" are verb tenses implying temporal movement rather than lifeless objecthood. Past perfect refers to an action that happened before a specific time in the past. Past imperfect indicates past actions that occurred regularly or are still occurring. These tenses express the times at which

> black women had to deal with "post-modern" problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad…in order not to lose your mind. These strategies for survival made the truly modern person.[36]

Further, the grouping of the tenses suggests various moments in time or perspectives relative to the viewer. Nonetheless, as the first label states, Simpson's figures are always actively "present." Their significance came before and continues outside their display in a museum or even this image. Their turned backs imply that Simpson's concerns are past imagining her subjects as perfect or imperfect. Instead, they are undefined and unlimited entities, like the depthless backgrounds they face.

Further, "by not revealing their faces… [Simpson] allows the single individual she photographs to signify many others."37 She seems to compare the figures that flank the mask to not only other black women, but also their range of viewers. These females are also spectators with individual frames of reference and portrayal, refusing their essentialization or articulation to the mask they observe. Simpson thus simultaneously

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[36] Lorna Simpson quoted in Copeland, *Lorna*, 65.
[37] Smith, *Fragmented*, 249.

deconstructs views of a fetishized or idealized African motherland; imaginations of Africa and its cultures as singular and fixed in time; and perceptions of black women that render them separate from mainstream society, yet indistinct from one another.

Figure 13: Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa*, 2008

South African artist Nandipha Mntambo's performative photograph *Europa* (2008) also highlights stereotypes of black women via corporeal transformation. Mntambo poses as a wild animal, confounding the viewer much like Grace Jones's fantastical exhibitionism as exhibited in photographs from the late 1970s. In fact, Mntambo's appearance echoes one of Jones's many iconic images photographed by her former French partner Jean-Paul Goude. On the invitation to the 1978 performance "A One Man Show," an encaged Jones is nude, snarling and crawling on all fours onstage. A sign announces "DO NOT FEED THE ANIMAL" as raw bloody meat and discarded

bones lie alongside Jones. She looks out to an audience whose heads line the bottom of the stage and frame of the photograph. Yet, unlike Mntambo and except for a long protruding black tail, Jones's appearance is unaltered. By leaving the singer intact, Goude's image reinforces notions of black women's "natural" carnality. While the literal staging of this scene suggests its artifice, "the irony implied in the performance was lost in the photograph used for the invitation" and the image harks back to the spectacle made of Sara Baartman aka The Hottentot Venus.[38] She too was exhibited like an exotic wild animal to the European public in the early 1800s.

In brief, Baartman, a South African woman born in 1789, was lured to Europe by a Dutch trader, and later exhibited before French and British audiences between 1810 and 1815. Viewers paid money to ogle her nude figure as a sexual object, physical oddity and "proof" of African women's alleged pathology due to the size of her breasts and buttocks. Upon her early death at 27 or 28 years of age, French anatomist George Cuvier dissected her body to allow for a medical examination of her genitalia. Cuvier aimed to find the cause of the "deviant lasciviousness of the African woman's sexuality."[39] Following his inspection, the Museum of Man in Paris displayed Baartman's skeleton, genitalia and brain until 1974, approximately 160 years after her death.[40] Finally, in 2002, after an eight-year campaign, the South African government received her remains to ceremoniously lay her body to rest.[41]

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[38] Kershaw, *Postcolonialism*, 20-21.
[39] Collins, *The Art*, 16.
[40] Mbeki, *Letter*.
[41] Ibid.

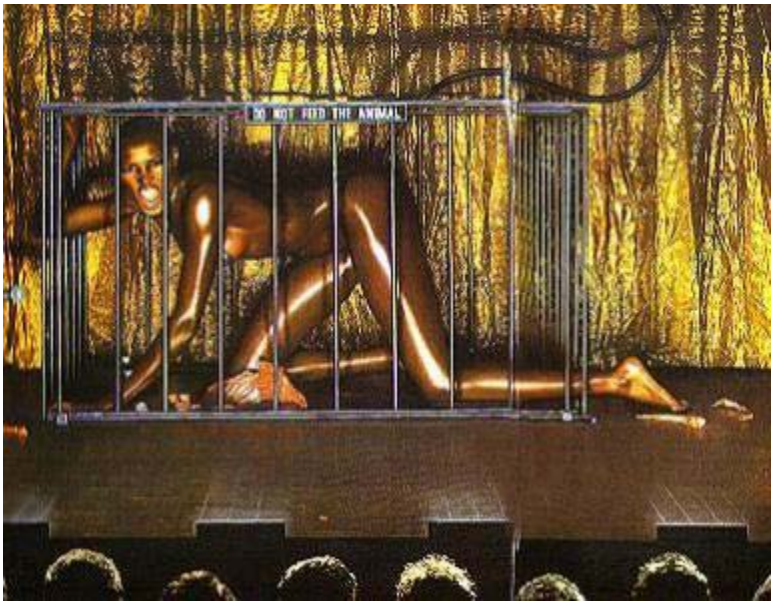

Figure 14: Jean-Paul Goude, "A One Man Show" invitation, 1978

In contrast to "A One Man Show," Mntambo's portrait functions less as an exaggeration and more as an interrogation of this history due to the allusion to Greek mythology. She masks her entire physicality to perform the role of Zeus, who, according to legend, disguised himself as a white bull in order to seduce the princess Europa.42 Once Europa mounted the bull, Zeus abducted and raped her after revealing his true identity. Mntambo ostensibly sensed a correlation between this story and histories of black women.

Embodying Claude Levi-Strauss's conception that myths illustrate cultural understandings of society, Mntambo applies horns, fur and makeup to masquerade as a

[42] Adams, *The Mythological*, 260.

black bull.43 Is she a Jezebel-like character, who now seduces and manipulates others like Zeus, or does the title indicate that she identifies with Europa, or perhaps both? That is, does the image simultaneously represent the mythification of black women as sexual predators, while commenting on their victimization through abduction (from Africa into slavery) and sexual exploitation (silenced and masked by stereotypes)? Mntambo asks the viewer to contemplate her perception of the black woman.

Europa also speaks to media depictions wherein "the bodies of black women…are not there to document the beauty of black skin, of black bodies, but rather…their features are often distorted, their bodies contorted into strange and bizarre postures that make the images appear monstrous or grotesque."44 Furthermore, by turning the myth on its head, she also demonstrates that, like a stereotype, a myth is culturally significant, but also a social construct. Analogous to Mntambo's artificial appearance, myths and stereotypes mask history to re-present contemporary society.

African-American artist Renee Stout also physically transforms herself in *Fetish #2* (1998). She becomes an African religious and cultural form to highlight a view of its symbolism as valuable, empowering and protective. In this celebrated work, she constructs herself as an nkisi, a sacred charm or power figure "thought to enclose spirits that are prepared…for both healing and aggressive purposes."45 Standing five feet and four inches tall, the work is a plaster cast of the artist's body painted dark brown. Stout

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43 Levi-Strauss, *The Raw*, 341. He states, "There is the simultaneous production of myths themselves, by the mind that generates them and, by the myths, of an image of the world that is *already* inherent in the structure of the *mind."*

44 hooks, *Black Looks,* 123.

45 Collins, *The Art,* 62.

applied hair extensions to the head, and adorned the torso and arms with jewelry, mesh and medicinal sacks for protection. Lastly, she attached a glass box onto the abdomen, which contains dried flowers, a baby photograph and Niger postage stamp, collectively referring to both the transience of life and the restoration of memory and history. Seemingly aware of the devaluation of African cultural forms and bodies, as explored by Simpson, Stout subverts it by offering the viewer a poetic depiction of the black female body enveloped in African iconography.

Figure 15: Renee Stout, *Fetish #2*, 1988

Fetish #2 rescues the nude black female body from eroticized connotations, knowingly implied by the title. Stout has stated that, “in creating that piece, if I never created another one, I had created all that I need to protect me for the rest of my life,” [as

the work employs] “my own figure to empower myself, to give myself strength to deal with the things you have to deal with every day.”46 Thus, Stout prefers not to explicitly address the misreading or misuse of black women’s bodies. She instead fashions a counter-image that forestalls sexualization. In doing so, like Paulino and Simpson, she uses African culture, often viewed as fixed in the past, to address the modern-day difficulties experienced by black women.

SPLITTING HAIRS

Before introducing artists' visualizations of the politics of black women’s hair by Paulino, Sonia Boyce, Lorna Simpson, Alison Saar and Zanele Muholi, it seems appropriate to frame the following discussion with Carrie Mae Weems’s *Mirror, Mirror* (2001). Perhaps as a form of defense or coping mechanism, in this captioned photograph, Weems makes a joke of black female subjectivity. The text reads, “Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says, ‘Snow White, you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!’” In the piece, this “joke” describes the woman’s (self-)reflection, after which she is unable to look directly into the mirror held in her hands. From the other side of the frame, a woman dressed in white, performs the role of the mirror that “could speak nothing but the truth.”47 Thus, the mirror’s reply contends that Western culture bases its image of beauty on the features of white women, espousing an ideal that few black women can attain.

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46 Ibid., 63 and Harris *Resonance*, 132.
47 Vandergrift, *Snow White.*

Figure 16: Carrie Mae Weems, *Mirror, Mirror*, 2001

Consequently, Weems' artwork visualizes the reality of internalized racism due to the subject's physical contrast from what is presumed to be universally beautiful. Thus, societal attitudes regarding physical features, not only have socio-economic consequences, they can also perpetuate emotional distress and self-denigration.[48] As exemplified, the model is unable to face her own visage. Her pose represents "the implications of Fanon's conclusion that the colonized is 'forever in combat with his own image,'" which Kobena Mercer has equated to a "denied entry into the alterity which Lacan sees as grounding the necessary fiction of the unified self."[49] In this sense,

[48] West, *Mammy*.
[49] Mercer, *Busy*, 29.

Weems's subject lacks the required identification with her image in the mirror to form the psychic armor of a complete identity. Unable to see herself through her own eyes, she instead defers to the unfavorable view of others. The subject is divided as the presence of another woman represents her thoughts before a mirror. This internal struggle largely stems from the sustained inundation of visual imagery in the media, which is deficient in naturalistic representations of women of color. When black women are featured, they often possess some type of Euro-ethnic feature, which is usually long, straight(ened) hair.

Hair is arguably the physical feature most analyzed by black women artists, as it is often politically loaded in their societies. Similar to masks, it also has a transformative quality. That is, one can manipulate and alter her hair easily to reflect a social or political identity. For example, in Brazil, the advertisements directed towards black women are largely for hair products encouraging them to straighten or "control" their hair.50 The phrases cabelo bom (good hair) and cabelo ruim (bad hair) are understood and used throughout Brazil, not just in black communities, as is generally the case in the U.S.. 51 This dynamic underscores the significance of hair texture in Brazil, which places a large amount of pressure on black women to chemically "relax" their hair. Given that good hair is straight and bad hair is tightly curled, and that these distinctions closely correlate with one's ethnicity, hair is a "key site for mapping internal struggles and transformations related to race and gender."52 In response, many black Brazilian female activists wear their hair naturally, however it might grow, to affirm its beauty, just as many African-

[50] Pinho, *Afro-Aesthetics*, 279.
[51] Caldwell, *Negras*, 87.
[52] Caldwell, *Negras*, 104.

Americans demonstrated that “Black is Beautiful” in the 1970s. 53 This defiance is a powerful statement in a country that ethno-racially classifies its citizens according to phenotype, which further correlates with perceptions of one's behavior. Afro-ethnic features “are impregnated with negative connotations such as presumed inferiority, lack of intelligence, laziness, dirtiness, promiscuity, being untrustworthy, etc.”54 Thus, if a Brazilian woman possesses tightly curled hair, along with other physical "marks," she is of African descent, and if she is of African descent, she must be hypersexual.

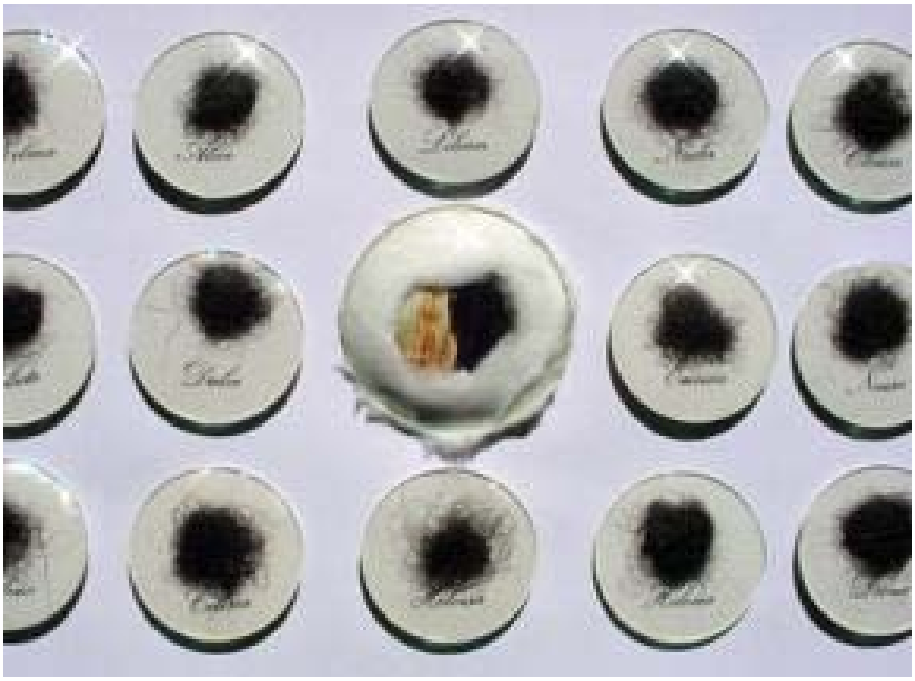

Figure 17: Rosana Paulino, U*ntitled (The Three Graces)*, 1998

Paulino represents these politics in an installation from her *Three Graces* series (1998). She portrays what sociologist Ginetta Candelario has described in reference to women's hair in the Dominican Republic, another country with a large Afro-descendant

53 Santos, *Brazilian Black,* 105.
54 Santos, *Brazilian Black,* 107.

population.[55] Candelario states that Dominican women are "lay anthropologists, employing the sort of reading of the racialized body utilized by…Franz Boas."[56] Referring to an intense inspection and classification of black women's hair, Paulino placed black tresses under small glass domes that she mounted to the wall. She labeled each one with a woman's name, likening the pieces of hair to scientific specimens. In the center of the sea of black strands, she placed one dome containing a picture of a young black girl holding and looking at a blonde-haired doll in her hands.

The central placement of this scene evokes Eurocentric ideals of feminine beauty. Blonde, blue-eyed performers and models populate Brazilian media reflecting these standards to a predominately dark-haired and dark-skinned audience. Notably, this form of brainwashing begins at an early age, as Brazilian schoolbooks rarely depict black people in a positive manner, if at all.[57]

[55] Robles, *Black Denial*. Estimates vary regarding Dominican Republic's black population (depending on how it is defined), but 85-90% consider themselves *mulatto* (of African and Spanish and/or Taíno Indian descent).
[56] Candelario, *Hair race-ing*, 144. Coincidentally, Franz Boas was Gilberto Freyre's mentor at Columbia University.
[57] Twine, *Racism*, 55.

Figure 18: Xuxa Meneghel and her Paquitas

Instead, what Paulino's young subject would see are images, such as "Xou da Xuxa," once the most famous children's show in Brazil and several other Latin American nations. Its host, actress and singer Xuxa Meneghel, is a national icon whose "meteoric rise to stardom was facilitated by three key assets: her extremely white skin color, naturally blonde hair and blue eyes."58 Thus, her appearance is hardly, if at all, representative of the majority of the Brazilian population. In light of this predilection for loiras (blonde women), it seems that it is not enough to be white in Brazil. In reference to black people in advertising, scholar Amelia Simpson notes that "not only is there a notable absence of black female models, but white models with dark hair and eyes are also missing: 'The number of white, blond, blue-eyed models appearing in [Brazilian]

58 Caldwell, *Negras*, 193.

publications makes one think more of Sweden than Brazil.'"59 Paulino's installation thus becomes a pseudo-scientific examination, recalling eugenicist ascriptions of inferiority to black women. However, the predominance of black hair in the piece, in relation to blonde hair, also seems to ask, who really is the aberrant "other" in Brazil?

British artist Sonia Boyce also takes a social scientific approach in her installation entitled *Do You Want To Touch?* (1996-98). She covers the wall with hairpieces and places them on pedestals, likening them to objects in an ethnographic museum. Similar to African masks, also meant to be worn, the hairpieces are divorced from their context and rendered as functionless oddities.

Figure 19: Sonia Boyce, *Do You Want To Touch?*, 1996-98

59 Simpson, *The Mega-Marketing*, 39.

The title also complexly alludes to several themes. Boyce refers to the actual experience of viewing artwork in museums and galleries. She invites the viewer to question customarily distanced observations of art. In Walter Benjamin's words, she presents mechanically produced objects for the viewer to handle, and thus "wither…the aura of the work of art."[60] In a sense, her piece affirms his call for "a tremendous shattering of tradition."[61] However, as a sexual come-on, the title calls to mind bell hooks' assertion that "today much of the sexualized imagery for black [females]…seems to be fixated on hair,"[62] which is the sole medium of the piece.

Boyce's title also alludes to an experience and annoyance particular to black females. That is, (non black) persons' expressed desire and attempts to touch their hair. This situation parallels the customary inspection of slaves that emphasized their sub-human status. As tightly curled hair texture is the antithesis to the long, straight hair valorized in television commercials and magazine advertisements, it becomes a curiosity in Western culture. Boyce's scenario thus creates "a claustrophobic reaction to the work, with a tension between wanting to touch and wanting to look."[63] Further, her work equates the institutional violation of touching artwork with the personal violation of touching black women's hair.

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[60] Benjamin, *The Work*, 221.
[61] Ibid.
[62] hooks, *Black Looks*, 122.
[63] Bailey, *Mirage*, 70.

Figure 20: Lorna Simpson, *Stereo Styles,* 1988

Lorna Simpson's work, *Stereo Styles* (1988) relates to the aforementioned scrutiny of hair, and the attempt to assimilate into mainstream society through its transformation. The work consists of ten prints and ten labels, lined up in a taxonomic fashion. Each label is inscribed with stereotypically feminine adjectives often used in advertising, such as "long & silky," "ageless," and "country fresh." In each print, Simpson positioned the model with her back to the camera, making her various styles of straightened hair, most of which are in disarray, the subjects. The title, a conflation of "stereotypes" and "hairstyles," implies that reductive notions of black women often extend to their hair. In the case of Simpson's model, she unsuccessfully tries to control and deny her hair's natural texture in efforts to comply with conventions of femininity. As a result, the images imply that her attempts to conform to those narrow margins are not only impossible, but also unnecessary.

Figure 21: Alison Saar, *Delta Doo*, 1998

In contrast, African-American artist Alison Saar focuses on the powerful aspects of the much-maligned physical feature. In *Delta Doo* (1998), she conflates the past and the present by incorporating found consumer goods and materials that she says "have a kind of history…another function at one time and…that ghost is still hanging around."[64] Alluding to this supernatural presence, the title refers to the Mississippi River Delta region of the U.S., where many African-Americans practice or believe in Hoodoo, particularly in New Orleans.[65] In fact, Saar has expressed interest in Marie Leveau, who, according to a New York Times obituary, was the "Queen of the Voudous… [and] an

[64] Saar quoted in Collins, *The Art*, 60.

[65] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 241 and Hurston, *Hoodoo*, 317-18. Hoodoo is West African-derived magic practice and belief primarily found in the southeastern U.S. states and Caribbean.

object of mystery."[66] In light of a connection to this strong black female figure, Saar's sculpture is a symbol of power and ambiguity that resists stereotypical characterization.[67] It is devoid of references to the sexualization or uglification of black women's physicality. Instead, the piece is an amalgam of the spiritual, physical and economical realms, signifying the complexity of black women's multifaceted lives and histories.

Saar also recalls the social significance of black women's hair by playing on the expression "hairdo" in her title *Delta Doo*. Hair is thus an "indicator of status and belief," as suggested by the literal fusion of religious elements into the head of the sculpture.[68] This construction replicates a traditional element of Hoodoo, the bottle tree, which is a U.S. and West Indian adaptation of Kongo grave decorations.[69] To protect their households, Hoodoo practitioners place empty glass bottles in trees to attract and capture evil spirits.[70] Instead of a tree, Saar has placed the bottles in her figure's hair, which rises from the sculpture like branches. This effect cleverly relates "rootwork" to the roots of a tree, the roots of one's hair and the roots of one's culture.[71] Comparable to Renee Stout's Fetish #2, cultural and corporeal elements allude to the empowerment of black women.

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[66] *The Dead.*

[67] Webb, *Louisiana Voodoo*, 292. Webb states, "For some 20 years after the Civil War, the most powerful figures among the Negroes of New Orleans were the voodoo queens who presided over ceremonial meetings and ritual dances."

[68] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 243.

[69] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 241, Gundaker, *Tradition*, 61 and Thompson, *Flash*, 142-45.

[70] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 241 and Gundaker, *Tradition*, 61.

[71] Rootwork is a synonym for Hoodoo, as practitioners believe roots have magical attributes and cure ailments.

Figure 22: Zanele Muholi, *Self*, 2005

Likewise, South African photographer Zanele Muholi incorporates themes of somatic empowerment and protection in a representation of her *Self* (2005). She positions the camera directly over her body, a perspective that essentially objectifies Muholi's figure, as she seems contained by the photographic frame, and not by her own volition. At the same time, her hair obscures her body, making it the central (visual) aspect of her "self." As in the U.S. and Brazil, South Africa also has commonsense understandings of "good" and "bad" hair. However, in South Africa, one can obtain "good hair" by straightening it, as opposed to Brazil and the U.S., where you have "bad hair" by virtue of

the fact that it must be straightened.72 Nonetheless, Muholi resists compliance with this practice, and presents her natural dreaded locks of “bad hair" as her symbolic self.

The camera’s focus on Muholi’s hair alludes to the myth of Medusa as well. In this sense, aligned with the feminist interpretation of the myth, her untamed, serpentine locks become sources of power and protection, communicating rage. 73 Further, the placement of her hands recalls Freud’s association of the gorgon with castration. He surmised that a boy believes castration is a threat when he “catches sight of the female genitals…surrounded by hair.”74 Therefore, Muholi's gesture is likely a reference to the anxiety that her presence might generate, which can result in another threatening aspect of the Medusa myth, namely rape. As a lesbian, Muholi is vulnerable to the existing threat of “curative (or corrective) rape” in South Africa.75 This form of sexual assault is meant to punish, correct and “cure” female homosexuality. Her nation is currently “witnessing a backlash of crimes targeted specifically at lesbian women who are perceived as representing a direct and specific threat to the status quo.”76 Given Muholi’s inherent negation of prescribed gender roles and heteronormativity, the deployment of her physical features (hair and hands) approximates Paulino's self-portrait above, also suggesting self-protection.

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72 Pinho, *Afro-Aesthetics*, 281. Pinho refers to writings by Zimitri Erasmus, when she states, “in South Africa…‘good hair’ means straight hair, either naturally straight or straightened by iron or chemical processes.”
73 Wilk, *Medusa*, 217-20. Wilk explains that Medusa has become a “symbol of empowered female rage” although by many feminists and women, who are often not familiar with the mythology, due to Medusa’s immediately recognizable “savage, threatening appearance.”
74 Freud, *Sexuality,* 202.
75 *Hate crimes.*
76 *Hate crimes,* 5.

THE "EYES" HAVE IT

The allusion to sexual violence in Muholi's photograph serves as a segue to works created by Rosana Paulino, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Renee Cox, Renee Green and Lorna Simpson. In addition to this theme, their images investigate sight, or staring as an act loaded with power, whether done to objectify, judge or confront. In their works, allusions to staring often bring specific physical components of black women into focus. Their breasts and buttocks have historically been viewed as signifiers of sexuality and to support pseudo-scientific determinations of sub-human or animalistic qualities.77 In addition, the following works address the hyper-visibility of black women, as it is "directly linked to vulnerability, lack of power, and the potential for sexual exploitation."78 Not only does the stare produce adverse psychological effects, its motive has the potential for physical and violent harm. In other words, if society views black women's bodies as hypersexual and available, that perception is a probable motivation of rape. Consequently, it also becomes probable reasoning against black women's claims of rape. Effectively explaining the dire implications of the Jezebel and other like-minded stereotypes of the "bad black girl," Kimberlé Crenshaw avers:

> …Black women are essentially prepackaged as bad women within cultural narratives about good women who can be raped and bad women who cannot….The very representation of a Black female body at least suggests certain narratives that may make Black women's rape either less believable or less

77 hooks, *Black Looks*, 62, in reference to Sander Gilman's essay, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature."
78 Collins, *The Art,* 53.

> important. These narratives may explain why rapes of Black women are less likely to result in convictions and long prison terms than rapes of white women.[79]

Due to these ramifications, black women artists recognize that the Jezebel stereotype functions to justify sexual exploitation and violence before and after the fact. That is to say, because this characterization hypersexualizes black women, an assailant might imagine his victim desires sexual activity (when she does not), and that he is free to "invade and violate a black female body with no fear of retribution or retaliation" afterwards.[80]

Figure 23: Rosana Paulino, *Sem Titulo*, 2005

[79] Crenshaw, *Mapping*, 369.
[80] hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.

Tackling these issues of victimhood, an untitled illustration from 2005 by Rosana Paulino depicts the torso of an armless nude figure with ropes around her neck and a trail of red blood that descends from her genitalia. Additionally, eight sets of eyes surround the figure, ogling her from top to bottom. In Brazil, many black women often avoid classification as mulata because it is synonymous with prostitute or professional showgirl.81 Partially due to the imagery of black women in the media to encourage sexual tourism and advertise Carnival, an ethno-racial identity is conflated with licentiousness. This association also stems from the promulgation of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil. Proponents of the myth contend that the intimacy afforded to black women through sexual intercourse negates racism, leading others to presume interracial sex is proof of racial equality.

Nonetheless, Paulino's work refutes any notion of fair treatment toward this victim of violence. Her lack of arms suggests an inability to protect, clean and cover her body. This detail also alludes to the Combahee River Collective's assertion that black women, "do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess anyone of these types of privilege have."82 In addition, the rope around the figure's neck could represent thoughts of suicide, while it also calls to mind the brutal floggings of female slaves, wherein they "were stripped of their clothing and publicly whipped…[thus compounding their degradation by being] forced to appear naked before male whippers

81 Caldwell, *Negras*, 60 and Gilliam, *The Brazilian Mulata*, 64.
82 *The Combahee River Statement.*

and onlookers."83 Moreover, the eyes that populate the background do not come to the figure's aid. Bodiless and faceless, they leer at the victim turning her into a spectacle. By not depicting anything more than the eyes of the onlookers, Paulino's scene suggests an interrogation, and one of the woman rather than her assailant or circumstances.

Figure 24: María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *When I Am Not Here/Estoy Allá*, 1996

Formally similar to Paulino's drawing is a photograph from Afro-Cuban artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons's series, *When I am Not Here/Estoy Allá* (1996). Like Paulino's image, Campos-Pons combines her nude torso and numerous gazing eyes. Her work differs by the direction her body faces, which is away from the viewer. This gesture

83 hooks, *Ain't*, 37.

disallows sexualization of the imagery that the eyes suggest one might be inclined to envision. Nonetheless, while the image calls to mind voyeurism and violation, the artist complicates the message by painting eyes onto her body.

This feature proposes contradictory readings. Perhaps the eyes signify black women as objectified and under surveillance. Alternatively, because the eyes look back at the viewer, they are in effect calling (mis)interpretative stares into question or serving as a protective shield.84 In either case, Campos-Pons's work speaks to the vulnerability of many black women, particularly when aware of the unintentional sexual overtones of their bodies.

Figure 25: Renee Cox, *HOTT-EN-TOT*, 1994

84 Firstenberg, *Autonomy*, 324.

Jamaican-American artist Renee Cox also visually and optically confronts this topic. In *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1994), Cox boldly identifies as and with Sara Baartman by wearing visibly fake, oversized breasts and buttocks as she stares directly into the camera lens and thus at the viewer. Cox's image is a pointed exaggeration illustrative of popular cultural imagery of "inflated" black women's bodies. That she must wear appendages to approximate this fantasy emphasizes not only her figure, but also the aberrance of the stereotypes, not Cox, Baartman or any other black woman.

Further, Cox's hairstyle and facial features remained unchanged and unlike that of the real Baartman. All that was necessary for her to perform the role of a "Hottentot Venus" is prosthetic breasts and buttocks. In effect, Cox indicates that Baartman amounted to her body parts in the eyes of her viewers. Almost 200 years later, she implies her identification with this experience by using her own body. Like Paulino and Campos-Pons, she alludes to the socio-visual fragmentation of the black female nude. Similar to Renee Stout, Cox aims to rescue figures, such as Baartman and the subjects of Zealy's daguerreotypes, from eroticized connotations implied by her title that approximates the phrase "hot-to-trot." Her photograph indicates the sexualization to which photography (often under the guise of science) has been linked since the nineteenth century. As Brian Wallis explains,

> by their unprecedented nudity, the slave daguerreotypes intersect with pornography, that other regime of photography so central to the 1850s (at least in Europe) and so exclusively concerned with the representation of the tactile surface of the human body... [Likewise], the case of the Hottentot Venus marked

> the collapse of scientific investigation of the racial other into the realm of the pornographic.85

With her oppositional gaze, Cox thus fashions a counter-image to take on centuries of visual misuse of the black female body. Rather than a mask, she employs another African icon whose relevance is often viewed as fixed in the past to address her modern-day concerns.

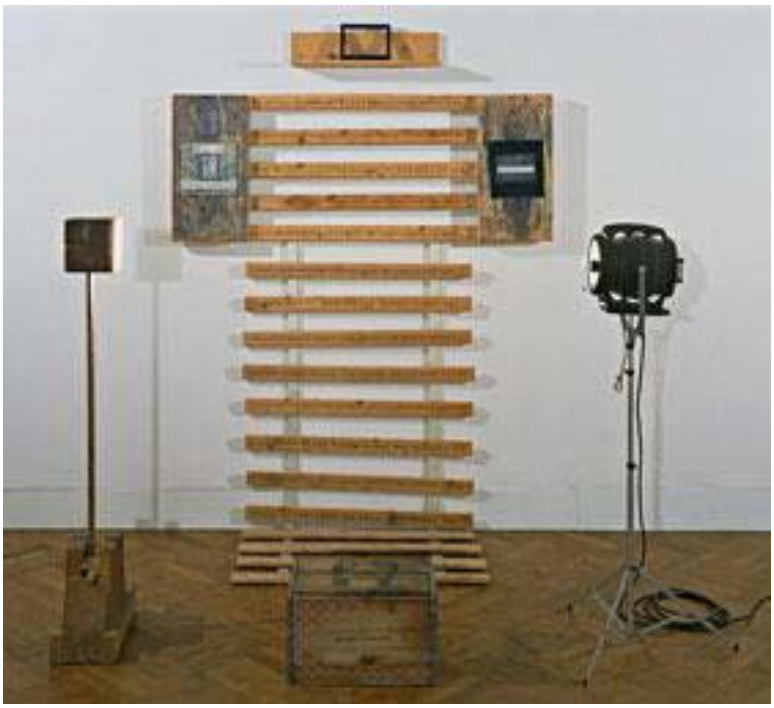

Figure 26: Renée Green, *Sa Main Charmante*, 1989

African-American artist Renee Green also pays homage to the life of Baartman in her installations *Seen* (1990) and *Sa Main Charmante* (1989). In both works, Green turns the tables of Baartman's treatment on the viewer. In the former, Green placed a collection of information relating to Baartman on a stage that the viewer has to ascend in order to

85 Wallis, *Black Bodies*, 106.

view. By doing so, her figure is displayed as a black shadow visible to other viewers in the gallery. In the latter, Green constructed a peep box containing a nineteenth-century caricature of "la belle Hottentote" as an adjacent spotlight shines on the viewer.[86] Viewers are “tricked into performing as curios, [much like Baartman when she was] deceitfully promised a rapid and wealthy return to southern Africa after a short stint of public displays in Europe.”[87] Instead, Baartman remained in Europe until her early death.[88] Therefore, to negate the innocence and articulate the effects of viewership, Green "provided the phenomenological conditions for the mechanism of this objectification."[89] By transforming the role of the viewer from passive spectatorship, and the stage from a platform for entertainment, Green interrogates a historical event as a part of a larger system that regards black women as sexual abnormal and available.

[86] Shepherd, *Renée Green*.
[87] Collins, *The Art*, 25.
[88] Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 27.
[89] González, *Subject*, 216.

Figure 27: Renée Green, *Seen*, 1990

In several works, Lorna Simpson alludes to these misconceptions of black women in Western culture by defacing her models. This strategy works to simultaneously refuse fetishization of or fixation on the black female body, while acting as a metaphor for subjugated or withheld knowledge. In *Sounds Like* (1998), white pieces of cloth cover a black woman's face in three framed photographs. Collectively the images read "I WITNESS," as a play on the words "I" and "eye." "I" personifies the piece and specifies the subject, depicted with her physical eyes covered, in contradiction to the phrase. As indicated, the subject was an eyewitness to, and ostensibly a victim of, a violent crime. Yet, her covered face conveys the impression that her testimony is inconsequential and perhaps not even attainable as the image suggests a scene from a morgue. The repetition

of the three framed images that imprison the subject also imply that the black woman's story has been continually questioned and suppressed. The viewer can only guess what it "sounds like."

Figure 28: Lorna Simpson, *Sounds Like*, 1988

For that reason, Kimberlé Crenshaw notes,

> in the legal arena, jurors [are] simply less willing to believe the testimony of black complainants…[which means], for the black rape victim, the disposition of her case may often turn less on her behavior than on her identity…Black women continue to be judged by who they are, not by what they do.90

In addition to, or as a result of, the discrediting of their stories, black women are more likely to hesitate to reveal their victimization to others or to remain silent.91 The inability or unwillingness of Simpson's subject to recount her tale illustrates what Lisa Gail Collins considers a "central paradox… [That is,] the search for evidence to justify dominant ideologies and practices… has been matched with the simultaneous suppression

90 Crenshaw, *Mapping*, 373.
91 West, *Mammy*.

of the history of this exploitation."92 Those women who choose to disclose this history often lack support, thereby compounding any feelings of shame they might have.93 Thus, Simpson's triptych leaves the viewer to imagine a number of stories possibly hidden behind the cloths. Like many histories of black women, this one remains unknowable. Instead of subjecting herself to repudiation, Simpson's subject may well have opted for silence, denial and dissemblance, as a form of a protection.

In conclusion, the discussed works exemplify the contention that since the slavery era, the stereotypes of black women as sexually promiscuous in Brazil and beyond have had real-world, material consequences. Rosana Paulino and several black women artists continually and creatively find ways to interrogate these notions within society and culture. Viewed as explorations of the masking and concealment of subjects, prejudiced views of natural physical features and potential motives for sexual exploitation and violence, their works broaden the concerns of art historical discourse. Further, the artists provide analyses of a socio-cultural stereotype that plagues black women and often leads to the socio-economical conditions to be discussed in the following chapter. These challenges that stem from slavery-era relegation result in the continuation of black women's service and servitude, which remains virtually unchanged in modern-day Brazil.

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92 Collins, *The Art*, 34.

93 West, *Mammy*. West states, in a study, 64% of the black women "were more likely to wait before revealing their sexual assault," as opposed to 36% of the white women.

Chapter Two: Fabrication, Lactation and Retaliation: Rethinking the Physical Product(ion)s of Black Women's Domestic Service[94]

In contrast to numerous portrayals of black female domestic service and social status in modern art history, Rosana Paulino and several women artists of the African Diaspora, including Betye Saar, Renee Cox, Latifa Echakhch and Xaviera Simmons variously shed light on realities and counter stereotypes of related subject matter. While this chapter explores how these artworks suggest shared concerns among the artists, it also aims to demonstrate how they encompass diverse techniques and sensibilities. Together, the works figure blackness as an experiential, not essential, connection. That is, these pieces focus on labor exploitation, domestic violence, socio-economic disparities and other conditions reinscribed in stereotypes to exploit black women further, but do so in formally and conceptually distinct ways. Their "artistic articulation" thus prompts a rare, extensive reflection on black women's service and roles in the African Diaspora.[95]

Notwithstanding this complexity, representations of black female figures in modern art have been similar and limited. Painters often depicted them as servants of a sexual or domestic nature or both. They aestheticized their labor into forms of acceptable blackness, which is typically scenery or a supporting cast. Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863-65) is arguably the most famous example of this form of typecasting.

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[94] The majority of the passages on *Wet Nurse*, *Before the Battle*, *Lip* and *Housewife* in this chapter include text previously published in Fletcher, *Up For Review*.

[95] As mentioned in the introduction, Stuart Hall describes articulation as an inadvertent joining of distinct units due to historical circumstances. It is "the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage, which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time…a linkage between [an] articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected." Grossberg *On Postmodernism*, 53.

While the title refers to the white female character portrayed by Victorine Meurent, reclining in the foreground, hers is not the only figure present. In the background appears Laure, the black "nursemaid temporarily turned artist's model" commonly overlooked in art histories and interpretations of the painting.96 Her presence is at once a sexual signifier, "who marks the nude white female as a prostitute," and a domestic servant, who presents flowers to her mistress.97

Figure 29: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863-65

Despite a few attempts to recover Laure's past, in countless interpretations of *Olympia*, art historians have rendered her marginal treatment that has not altered much since Emile Zola's remark in 1866. In a letter to Manet, he wrote, "You needed some clear and luminous patches of color, so you added a bouquet of flowers; you found it necessary to have some dark patches so you placed in a corner a Negress and a cat."98

96 Pollock, *Differencing*, 286.
97 Dallow, *Reclaiming*, 77.
98 Frascina, *Modern Art*, 36.

Nonetheless, Zola's indication that the Negress's presence is necessary was perceptive in more ways than he intended. Alas, his statement is accurate in terms of the painting's formal and socio-cultural aspects, that is, its tonal contrast and schema that regrettably denotes "a white body (Olympia) governed by 'the lascivious sensuality of the blacks that flow in its veins' (the black female servant)."[99] As yet another form of the entwinement of domestic and sexual service relative to black women, rather than Olympia, Laure contains the sexuality in the scene. She serves the viewer by offering her a view of Olympia's bouquet, a floral allusion to the genitalia that Meurent's hand demurely conceals.

Returning to Zola's statement, his words are also true, in the context of a modern, capitalist economy, such as the one burgeoning in nineteenth-century France. As Helen Molesworth explains,

> The ideals of modernity (progress, change, individual creation) are dependent on the denigrated and boring labor of maintenance (activities that make things possible—cooking, cleaning, shopping, child rearing, and so forth)…. [Furthermore,] it is absolutely structural to patriarchy and capitalism that the labor of maintenance remains invisible. When made visible, the maintenance work that makes other work possible arrests and stymies the very labor it is designed to maintain.[100]

Thus, in order to maintain the presumed normality of Western socio-economic hierarchies, the historical service of black women has been necessary and necessarily unseen.

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[99] Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus*, 79.
[100] Molesworth, *House Work*, 78, 88.

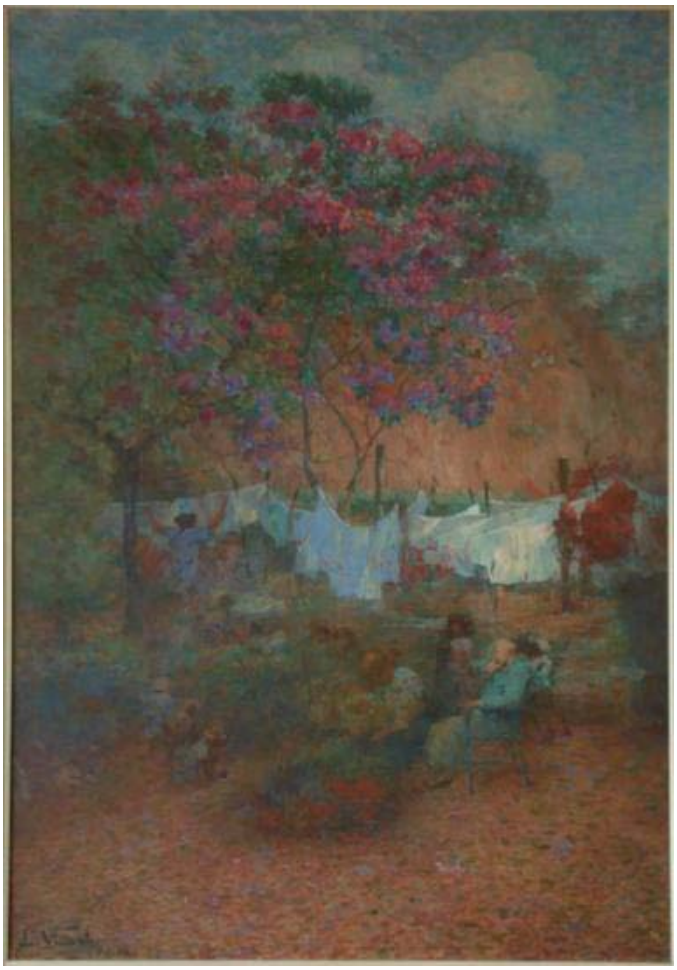

Figure 30: Eliseu Visconti, *Quaresmas (Glory Bushes)*, 1942

Quaresmas (*Glory Bushes*) (1942) and *Roupa Estendida* (*Clothing Hanging on the Line*) (1943), paintings by Brazilian impressionist Eliseu Visconti, exemplify this condition. Known for his series of landscape paintings that often depict the rural environs of Teresópolis, Rio de Janeiro in the 1940s, Visconti often formally visualizes the "denigrated and boring labor of maintenance," yet aesthetically it remains invisible. Black female bodies mutely support the scene as their real life counterparts support the society. As one interpretation of these two paintings states,

> Considerado pela crítica um renovador da pintura de paisagem no Brasil, anos depois, pinta paisagens de Teresópolis, Rio de Janeiro, como *Quaresmas* (1942) ou *Roupa Estendida* (1944), nas quais procura captar o vapor atmosférico da serra, com grande preocupação com a cor e a luz.[101]

Figure 31: Eliseu Visconti, *Roupa Estendida (Clothing on the Line)*, 1943

In other words, Visconti, whose works gave new vigor to Brazilian landscape paintings according to his critics, sought to capture the atmosphere of the mountains, and the color and light of Teresópolis's landscapes. The black female bodies inserted throughout the scenes were secondary, or rather irrelevant, in relation to the Brazilian verdure.

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[101] *Visconti*.

Unacknowledged in the titles, Visconti's "aesthetics of invisibility" effectively reduces black female figures to "dark patches" in his compositions.[102] Surrounded by dabs of green, blue and pinks, the figures become nameless features of the landscape, and their roles as servants are naturalized literally and figuratively. Visconti's painting tonally directs the viewer's attention elsewhere, namely to the "roupa estendida." The bright white laundry seems more out of place in the setting than the black female figures who "stay in their place" as laundresses.

Because images such as *Olympia* have played a part in the dissemination of a racial ideology in which the subordinated service of black women is deemed natural and marginal, many contemporary black women artists use their practice in ways that "have not collapsed the distinction between art and life; rather, they have used art as a form of legitimated public discourse, a conduit through which to enter ideas into public discussion"[103]. They recognize that their art can create a political and strategic space. Like literature and film, the visual arts enter social and academic debates to become a tool for the artist to speak on the behalf of groups with limited access to such discussions. Just as *Olympia* reflected "Manet's…fundamental belief in art as a part of social discourse" and persuaded its viewers to reconsider the function of painting as more than

[102] Thompson, *Call the Police*, 176. In reference to the representations of the Caribbean, Thompson states the "aesthetics of invisibility…of both the sublime and picturesque, were precisely about the presentation of beauty and its stunning visual effect, which resulted ultimately in the blinding of the viewer, blinding them precisely to…violence, horror, and terror."
[103] Molesworth, *House Work*, 95-96.

the representation of an idealized fantasy, so too does black women's artwork create a productive dialogue within societies.[104]

FIBER OPTICS

Rosana Paulino, along with Betye Saar and Shinique Smith, politically and strategically uses space in installations that incorporate string, cloth and other fabrics to evoke harsh labor conditions and ethno-social inequities. In Paulino's installation of *Casulos* (*Cocoons*) from 2000, she subverts the usual connotation of a cocoon as a private, protective space. Rather than imparting a sense of comfort or suggesting a retreat from the stresses of life, Paulino tightly wrapped small figures in overlapping white thread and suspended them from the pillars in her exhibition space. The strings evoke adverse conditions and social, political and economic restrictions that affect numerous black women's social mobility in Brazil and elsewhere.

[104] Brettell, *Modern Art,* 130.

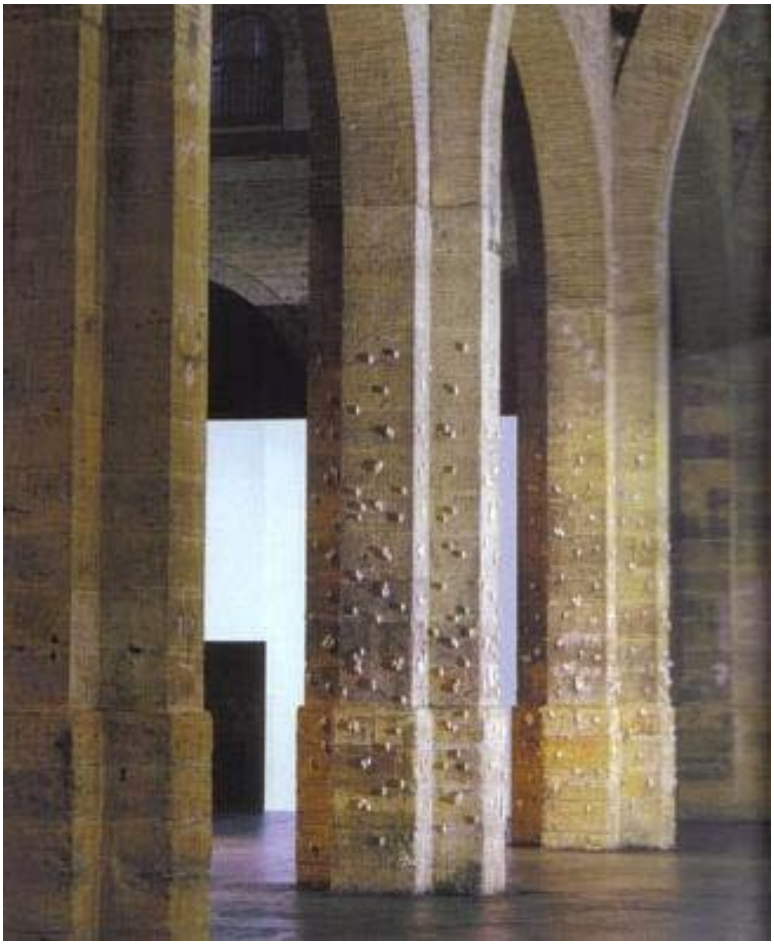

Figure 32: Rosana Paulino, *Casulos (Cocoons)*, 2000

Paulino's use of the color white in this artwork also emphasizes social psychologists Aída Hurtado and Abigail Stewart's contention that "at its core, whiteness is based on racial subordination…It is in the owning of people of color, historically through slavery, not through their labor, that white men's manhood was transformed in the new world." 105 The white string in Paulino's *Casulos* therefore does not suggest privilege, power or freedom, but rather its arrogation in the name of whiteness. The

[105] Hurtado, *Through*, 322, 324.

strings evoke the close "ties," or rather dependence, of white employers on black workers. Paulino thus visualizes the covering up of the underlying conditions of the privileges and freedoms that accompany whiteness, as suggested by the submersion of the figures. Paulino also installed *Casulos* on the columns of an institutional space (possibly as a clever analogy to another (architectural) support system).106 Although they allude to disregarded labor, the cocoons are ironically on public view. Their display serves as recognition of the concurrent necessity and denial of black women's service to maintain illusions of white supremacy.

Figure 33: Rosana Paulino, *Casulos* (*Cocoons)* (detail), 2000

Further, the wrapping of the figures in white string touches on the historical reality of interracial entanglements in Brazil. "Many white Brazilians heralded the early

106 In 2001, Paulino installed *Casulos* on the columns of CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux, France for a group exhibition.

twentieth century as the dawn of a 'racial democracy,' which was to be achieved through miscegenation."[107] *Casulos* re-present the storied sexual relations of the Brazilian population by illustrating them as a means to *branqueamento* (whitening), or the literal and figurative conception of a white society. Although Brazilian officials cloaked miscegenation as proof of racial democracy, they actually viewed it as a racial remedy. Historian Kim D. Butler states, "the infusion of white 'superior' blood through miscegenation [was] advocated [by eugenicists] as a means to rid Brazil of blacks entirely."[108] Following the publication of Gilberto Freyre's *Casa Grande e Senzala (The Masters and the Slaves)* in 1933, which celebrated the interracial (sexual) relations of Brazilian society, the political objective of miscegenation was effectively suppressed in social memory, much like the figures within Paulino's cocoons. In seeming response, however, their display sheds light this concealed operation and its consequences.

[107] Butler, *Up From Slavery*, 179.
[108] Ibid.

Figure 34: Rosana Paulino, *Tecelãs com Casulos (Weavers with Cocoons)*, 2001

The *Casulos* metamorphose in Paulino's installation of *Tecelãs* (2001), in which she populates the work with brown-toned female figures like Visconti, but with an approach more focused on their presence. Paulino constructed numerous terracotta figurines, which decorate the expanse of the gallery's wall. Like chrysalises, they are in a transitional state and hovering above the cocoons—crudely formed vessels of varying dimensions in this instance—from which they have emerged. As in the *Casulos* above, white thread encases the figures, but only up to their midsections. While the cocoons no longer fully contain the weavers, the partial confinement reveals and results in deformation. As suggested by the title, the entrapment alludes to the labor of black Brazilians. George Reid Andrews specifies that in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1920s,

"Afro-Brazilians were most likely to be found in the textile industry."109 In a sense, the strings loosen only to allow the weavers to perform “back-breaking” work that threatens their physicality.

Figure 35: Rosana Paulino, *Tecelãs com Casulos (Weavers with Cocoons)*, 2001

By visualizing precarious births of working class black women, Paulino counters the ways in which upper class white women often make sense of their social status. They consistently distance themselves from the origins of their race/class privilege by claiming that it was based on an accident of birth that they had nothing to do with creating. Their class and race membership was not borne out of a conscious intention on their part;

[109] Andrews, *Afro-Latin America*, 143.

therefore…the respondents…distance themselves from the phenomenon as if it were a natural disaster they had nothing to do with creating and resent having to clean up.[110]

The distorted and constricted figures of *Tecelãs* however demonstrate another perspective. Their formal (or socio-economical) limitations upon birth are largely due to their symbolic entrapment in whiteness, the privileges of which they lack in their (socio-cultural) context. Nonetheless, as Saar's states by her 1998 installation *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*, Paulino's *Tecelãs* also bend without breaking, and even continue to rise.

As in Visconti's paintings, African American artist Saar also focuses the viewer's attention on white laundry in *I'll Bend*. However, she offers the viewer a decidedly different perspective on socio-economic relegation and domestic servitude by removing the laboring figures and setting her scene in a corner space. The viewer now embodies the role of Visconti's servants. With her back to the gallery, she is in a vulnerable position, effectively cast outside the activity behind her, and faced with a large white sheet.

[110] Hurtado, *Through*, 318-19.

Figure 36: Betye Saar, *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*, 1998

Discreetly embroidered with the letters "KKK," the linen hangs from a clothesline behind a vintage ironing board and iron connected together by a manacle. On the surface of the board, Saar included a view of the overcrowded interior of a slave ship next to the image of a black female staring up at the viewer. *I'll Bend* thus sparingly, yet powerfully, figures the black female servant as the nexus of race, gender, class, labor and violence in U.S. history. Nonetheless, as indicated by the affirmation-cum-title, although she has been maltreated, she has not succumbed.

Returning to the sheet, Saar's piece also prominently features the color white. In contrast to paintings by Robert Ryman, arguably the contemporary artist most often associated with white artwork, Saar's white is not "privileged just because it doesn't interfere."[111] In fact, it stands in the viewer's way, positioned to obstruct her sight. However, similar to Ryman's paintings, Saar's installation and its references, "are not abstract; instead…they are 'realist'…making interaction and the experience it generates the hallmark of [her] realism as well as its chief effect."[112]

Underlined by the square sheet, the interactive aspect of the work recalls the performativity of minimalism in the mid1-960s. At that time, artists, such as Robert Morris, were "committed to the idea that the art object could transgress the repressiveness of rarified and precious art objects."[113] Like Morris's sculptures, "to engage [*I'll Bend*] is to engage an 'object in a situation—one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder."[114] The phenomenological and performative aspects of *I'll Bend* also align the work with those by Adrian Piper and Mary Kelly. They also used minimal art forms "as a kind of aesthetic strategy for drawing attention to the concrete, specific, unique qualities of individuals" or to search "for the female body in relation to social forces, identity, feeling, power and temporal experience."[115] Likewise, Saar's installation points to actual historical events using specific objects to place the viewer "squarely" in a real-life

[111] Ryman quoted in Hudson, *Robert Ryman's*, 124.
[112] Hudson, *Robert*, 124.
[113] Berger, *Minimal Politics*, 7.
[114] Berger, *Minimal Politics*, 12.
[115] Piper quoted in Berger, *Minimal Politics*, *18-19;* Berger, *Minimal Politics*, 20.

situation. *I'll Bend* thus encourages contemplation of the black female experience in relation to the conditions signified by the color white.

Further, in *I'll Bend,* white alludes to not only the violence of the Klu Klux Klan and the oppression of slavery, but also to another specific theme: the un-specificity of whiteness. As Richard Dyer attests, the nature of white is "founded on [such] compelling paradoxes" as individuality and universality, corporeality and its transcendence, and heterosexuality and sexual repression. "In short, [it is] a need always to be everything and nothing" that gives whiteness its power.116 This quality renders whiteness impenetrable, and once again highlights an interesting correspondence between Ryman's work and Saar's.

Robert Storr once concluded, "Ryman's paintings pose a special challenge to critical writing. An art of incremental shifts of emphasis within a strictly limited repertoire of abstract elements, Ryman's work confounds ideological exegesis."117 Suzanne Hudson also stated Ryman's painting is "less 'anti-rhetorical' than a-rhetorical, unconcerned with the discourse that seeks to pin it down, as his subtle 'shifts of emphasis' disenfranchise absolutism, revising each seemingly conclusive assumption in turn."118 The acknowledgements of their struggle to "pin down" the white paintings resonate with most cultural theorists' and historians' claims regarding whiteness as a social category. While Storr and Hudson might view this difficulty as a result of factors other than whiteness, such as Ryman's process or comments, it is also due to "the

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116 Dyer, *On the Matter*, 311
117 Hudson, *Robert,* 125.
118 Hudson, *Robert,* 126.

invisible power of whiteness…[which] is translated into a neutral and universal category of 'personhood,'" or paint.

This so-called power prompts the viewer to look for reasons and meanings elsewhere, a distraction that Saar's white sheet frustrates. 119 By looking past or through the whiteness of Ryman's paintings to identify their significance, many texts on his artwork approximate the views of upper class white women on the import of their race. As explained by Hurtado and Stewart,

> [Whiteness] isn't viewed as problematic, given that it provides privilege…and that it is "natural" and therefore difficult to describe. It also seems like useless "work," like pressing the already ironed dress or putting clean dishes in the dishwasher—because it isn't a problem and everybody knows what it is, why indulge in introspective angst that leads nowhere?"120

Despite these impressions, Saar visualizes the usefulness of that and other forms of devalued work in her own. Further, she does not allow the viewer to look past the significance of whiteness in either her art or society. Similar to Paulino's *Casulos* and *Tecelãs, I'll Bend* thus speaks to the simultaneous visibility of whiteness to some people and its invisibility to others. The works indicate that references to an "invisibility…must be immediately specified by the question 'to whom?'"121

Although it is more colorful than the previously discussed works, African-American artist Shinique Smith's *Bale Variant Number 0011* (*2005)* also recalls devalued historical labor of black women in the field or home during the slavery era, and

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119 Banet-Weiser, *The Most*, 133.
120 Hurtado, *Through*, 318.
121 Frankenberg, *The Mirage*, 81.

contemporary labor commonly performed outside (but for the benefit of) the U.S. In one sense, this six-foot tall tower of used clothing compressed by twine refers to the "inequities of a global economy in which thrown-away clothing from the First World is shipped in bales to the Third."122

Figure 37: Shinique Smith, *Bale Variant Number 0011*, 2005

Nonetheless, this process is only one stage of an endless cycle of production and consumption, expenditure and waste. Most often these items are manufactured by workers in the sweatshops of the Third World to lower the costs of production and create profit from the increase of costs for the First World consumer. Smith's monumental

122 *Unmonumental.*

compilation of the outputted items serves as a (r)evaluation of Third World labor. She reinvests in the “clothing, textiles, shoes, stuffed toys, and cast-off materials that litter the urban landscape,” thereby disrupting the usual chain of events.[123] Rather than shipping, Smith inserts the bale into a higher-grade cycle of artistic production and consumption. What was once refuse or deemed no longer useful, is now a medium of fine art.

Consequently, the creation of a bale is not only a reinterpretation of undervalued labor of the past and present, the simplicity of its rectangular structure and the industrial production of its medium also recalls minimalist art from the 1960s. The forms of Donald Judd’s stacked boxes come to mind, while Smith’s matter-of-fact title approximates those of Sol LeWitt, such as *Cubic-Modular Wall Structure*, *Black or Forms Derived From A Cube*. Yet, while her structure also does not bear a sense of the artist’s hand, like so many minimalist works, *Bale Variant* does not only refer to itself, nothingness or formal elements. Whereas, John Chamberlain's crushed metal pieces for instance, function as freestanding (read self-sufficient) sculptures, Smith's works depend on rope used to gather articles together to produce its effect. The rope indicates a laborious effort to create the piece and that of the workers involved in the fabrication and exportation of items to support the clothing industry. Smith's “specific objects” thus split the difference between the "non-referentiality" of their restrained title and combined form and the socio-economical inequity of the practices from they are derived.[124]

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[123] *Unmonumental.*

[124] Here I refer to Donald Judd’s 1965 essay “Specific Objects,” in which he discusses the then radical new freestanding sculptural practices of artists, such Lee Bontecou, Claes Oldenburg and Richard Chamberlain. His text is primarily concerned with the formal parameters of artwork, however his last line states that many artists also "use real objects and depend on the viewer's knowledge of these objects." In Smith's case,

LACTOSE INTOLERANCE

Rosana Paulino and Kara Walker refer to the production and consumption not only facilitated by black women's physical labor, but also that of their physical being. In terms of the artistic and social discourses in Brazil, Paulino accounts for the oft-ignored "minor" histories of black women's work in her installation *Wet Nurse* (2008). On eight sheets of white cloth, she printed black, monochromatic female figures. She then stitched the cloths together and mounted them on the wall as one piece. Each print depicts a faceless wet nurse, alone or compromised by a child. Long white ribbons descend from the figures' breasts into corked glass bottles containing archival images on which the prints were based.

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she also seems to depend on a viewer's knowledge of her objects that includes the context in which they are produced and distributed.

Figure 38: Rosana Paulino, *Wet Nurse*, 2008

Paulino's multiplication of the bottles that link old and new images suggests the perpetuation of labor exploitation in contemporary Brazilian society, which relegates approximately 80 percent of black women to manual labor. "Half are maids and the rest are self-employed in even more precarious temporary domestic work."125 Paulino's use of archives also serves as documentation of a historical reality that many Brazilians idealize or ignore. During the slavery era in Brazil, "it was a common practice for White mistresses to use African women to breastfeed their babies during the period of slavery

125 *Afro-Brazilians.*

and to hire free Black women to do the same work following abolition in 1888."126 Just as the referential images of this history are "bottled up" in Paulino's installation, so too has the significance of black women's roles in Brazilian social history. This concealment generates dubious recognitions, such as those from renowned Brazilian social scientist Gilberto Freyre, who declared, "When it comes to a wet nurse there is none like a Negro woman" in 1946.127

Further, over 40 years later in 1990, the Italian-based clothing company Benetton released a controversial advertisement in France and Brazil, as "racial animosity was not considered to be a significant market factor in those countries [as in the U.S., where] the advertisement was rejected by black magazine publishers."128 The image in the advertisement by Olivier Toscani consists of a white infant suckling one of the exposed breasts of a black woman.

Figure 39: Olivier Toscani, *Black Woman Breastfeeding a White Baby*, 1990

126 Cleveland, *Appropriation*, 13.
127 Freyre quoted in Caldwell, *Negras*, 55.
128 Caldwell, *Negras*, 75.

Despite becoming "the most-awarded image in Benetton's advertising history," Toscani's image was greeted by protests from a number of antiracist activists in Brazil who viewed the campaign as a form of profiteering off of abusive slavery practices that "reproduced and reified colonialist representations."129 The calculated decision to release the ad in Brazil (and not in the U.S.) therefore speaks to persistent international (mis)understandings of racial democracy and black women's socio-economical roles in Brazilian history as wet nurses and the present as domestic servants.

Figure 40: Rosana Paulino, *Wet Nurse* (detail), 2008

Paulino's installation however becomes a factory-like setting that points up the industrial nature of the wet-nursing practice. Referencing the flow of milk that is the labor of a wet nurse, the white ribbons fill the bottles spread across the floor. Breast milk

129 *About Benetton*; Caldwell, *Negras*, 37.

is figured as a commodity the black female body produced to be valuable to a slaveholder, making the viewer aware of the "capital that inheres in breast milk."130 As it nourished generations of white children, it is also became the source of colonial power. The wet nurse supported the lives of their masters' progeny while they were often denied (or disallowed to sufficiently care for) their own.

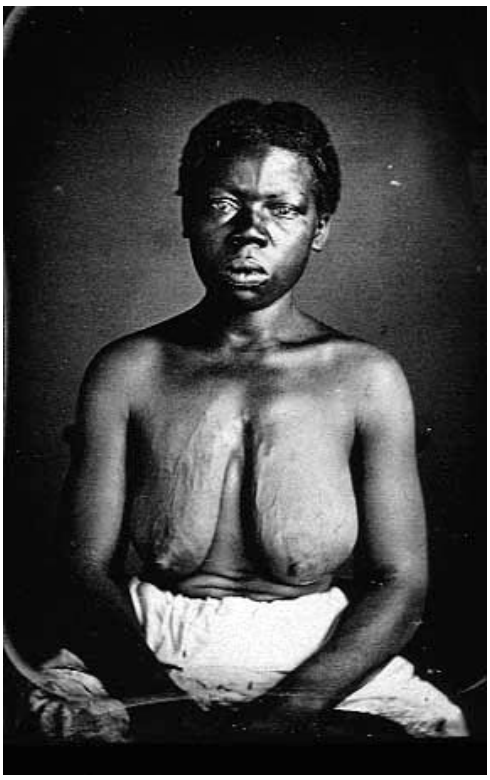

Figure 41: J. T. Zealy, *Drana,* 1850

Representing this labor, the series of prints in the top portion of *Wet Nurse* figuratively lactate. They also lack facial features or any attributes that personalize them. Instead, the black faceless bodies resemble nineteenth-century daguerreotypes of slaves in the U.S. that reduced "peoples to base cultural signifiers" to validate theories of their

130 McKee, *Preface*, 685.

biological inferiority.131 Paulino's use of three-quarter length portraits and nude torsos further emphasizes the prints' resemblance to ethnographic portraits, such as those produced by J. T. Zealy in 1850.132 In many of Zealy's images, "the subject's clothes were often shown torn, partially removed, or missing altogether; the body itself was often shown being whipped, beaten, hung, pierced, bitten, branded, or otherwise subjugated to a white oppressor."133 Likewise, Paulino presents silhouetted figures that are partially clothed and in compromising positions, likening the wet nurses to pet animals or toys furnished for children's enjoyment.

Figure 42: Rosana Paulino, *Wet Nurse* (detail), 2008

131 Firstenberg, *Autonomy*, 320.

132 Louis Agassiz commissioned J. T. Zealy to photograph black slaves from South Carolina in 1850. Brian Wallis has noted that in "the second series [of Zealy's daguerreotypes, the portraits were] more tightly focused, showing the heads and naked torsos of three men and two women. This series adhered to a phrenological approach, emphasizing the character and shape of the head." See Wallis, *Black Bodies*, 105.

133 Wallis, *Black Bodies*, 105-106.

Also resembling the “mug shot" photographs police use to classify criminals, the prints recall the once popular view of wet nurses as disseminators of disease and bad morals in Brazilian society.[134] Paulino’s use of the grid to feature her imagery references the taxonomic displays of black people in the Americas as well. While this strategic arrangement “gave credence to biological notions of race… [through its] conflation of the visual and the scientific” in the past, in Paulino’s artwork, the schematic also evokes the fragmentation and stereotypification of black female bodies in the present.[135]

Indeed, the present-day social and material conditions of black Brazilians are very much on the mind and in the artwork of Rosana Paulino. Her inclusion of ordinary found objects in *Wet Nurse* reflects the outskirts of São Paulo where she resides. The installation thus socially, aesthetically and monetarily elevates everyday materials that have been discarded as waste. She challenges the binary of high and low art, or fine art and craft, and rethinks the historical (de)valuation of women’s labor by employing items—cloth, thread, ribbons and bottles—that are associated with the domestic realm. In her reuse of and reinvestment in household waste, Wet Nurse acts as a call for the recognition of that which has been disregarded, namely black women’s long-standing service to the Brazilian nation.

[134] Cleveland, *Appropriation*, 13.
[135] Firstenberg, *Autonomy*, 315.

Figure 43: Kara Walker, *Before the Battle (Chickin' Dumplin')*, 1995

Employing a markedly different approach from that of Paulino, African-American artist Kara Walker focuses on the complexity of black women's socio-historical roles as servants. In Walker's oeuvre, she implicates all her characters, black and white, in hedonistic scenes set in the antebellum South. This is no less true in *Before the Battle (Chickin' Dumplin')* (1995), wherein a confederate soldier kneels to suckle the breast of a topless female slave. Heightening the impact of this provocative scene in her usual derisive manner, Walker depicts a chicken leg dropping from the slave's hand, due to surprise or ecstasy. Although Walker's starkly black and white scene is formally similar to Paulino's prints, her enmeshing of the figures into flat black forms instead emphasizes the complicity of both actors. Walker's silhouettes refuse typical racialization of their figures and project the complexity of black and white subjectivity. By avoiding

standardized depictions from “the closed circuit of negative and positive images,” her work speaks to the falsity of social boundaries that masters and servants are expected to maintain, but often transgress, as depicted in this scene.[136]

Walker’s portrayal is lurid, and there is an obvious disconnect between the attitudes conveyed in *Before the Battle* and *Wet Nurse*. To paraphrase Michael Harris, by using historical figures with a postmodern sensibility, Walker’s work often problematically omits the violence and cruelty of rape during the slavery era. As Harris also notes, her art signifies “nihilism and emotional isolationism,” while Paulino’s work conveys empathy and pathos.[137] Paulino pays homage to black women of the past forced to extend their bodies to the rearing of white children at the detriment of their own. And, although both artists feature bared torsos that recall the objectification of Zealy’s daguerreotypes, Walker ambivalently presents the black woman's participation (possibly strategic, possibly not) in her sadomasochistic spectacles. This uncertainty defies the dogmatic prescriptions for social responsibility in black artistic practice that artist Howardena Pindell advocates.[138] While Pindell's arguments are compelling, her insistence delimits the autonomy that she might also enjoy in her own work. Moreover, her words recall the burdensome demands for social responsibility that many black artists have resented throughout the past century.[139]

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[136] English, *This is Not*, 153

[137] Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 215.

[138] Pindell, *Diaspora*. See also Pindell's subsequent publication *Kara Walker-No/ Kara Walker-Yes/ Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch, 2009).

[139] The resentment felt by black abstract painters in the 1940s, such as Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff, for black intellectuals' pressure to "uplift the race" is an important observation in Ann Gibson's book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, which Pindell ironically endorses in her article.

Instead of simply mimicking derogatory images of the past, *Before the Battle*'s figural design and the title suggest something much more complicated. Together they indicate the confederate soldier's need for the nourishment and physical support of the black female body prior to the battle. This sustenance inevitably implicates the black woman, as she is literally supporting a man who will fight to keep her enslaved. Walker takes this scenario even further by suggesting a sexual dimension to their encounter. Underscored by the slave's hourglass figure, *Before the Battle* "depicts the transition of sex from reproductive utilitarian ends to an erotic surplus that stands outside the ends of slavery."140 The black female figure does not appear resistant, and is possibly complicit, with the continuation of her misuse, as she allows for (or suffers) the loss of her food for the soldier's sexual advances.

This surplus, however, amplifies the exploitative nature of the image and thus the slave-based economy. By turning black women's bodies into modes of production, slaveholders ensured their prosperity. Female slaves' "functional worth was tied not only to their ability to work… at domestic chores, but also directly to their ability to produce milk."141 Milk is thus "epistemological; it involves rethinking the liquid basis of global economies."142 In other words, the labor of female slaves to sustain their owners' families through the production of milk is the underlying and undervalued source of this nation's past and present-day wealth.

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140 Walker, *Kara Walker*, 111
141 Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 44
142 Yaeger, *Circum-Atlantic Superabundance*, 777

Walker’s illustration is therefore not a clear-cut reproduction of racist, historical caricatures.[143] The licentious exaggeration alone forecloses any easy interpretation of the work or the conditions of slavery. Rather, her black female subject becomes a complex amalgam, she is at once an object of desire that the soldier possesses and consumes, and a form of currency that pays the costs for her survival and fattens the pockets of her master. Enmeshed with the soldier, her figure prompts a rethinking of the prosperity of American society, to which the female slave was denied access, but forced to maintain. As in *Wet Nurse, Before the Battle* further reminds the viewer that the "a slave woman’s breasts, along with the rest of her body, did not actually belong to her," and can be accessed at will by white men and children to ensure their financial and physical well-being.[144]

Walker’s subtitle, *Chickin’ Dumplin’*, however, also suggests that the historical necessity of black female service creates complex situations between social groups that redefine the conventional roles of master and slave. Using an informal definition of chicken, the phrase suggests the cowardice of the white male soldier. He regresses to a subordinate status and position beneath the female slave's figure. Taking hold of his "dumplin'" (that is, the slave or her breast) in a childlike manner, he hesitates to go into battle. Freudian theory aside, Walker's depiction of the soldier's dependence on, and the maternal nature of, the female slave supersedes the call for our rejection of negative

[143] Michael Harris and Howardena Pindell have mentioned that Walker's silhouettes approximate the imagery of racist cartoons of 19th-century publications, such as *Scribner's Monthly*. However, Harris’s analysis of Walker’s work is measured. He deliberates over her forms, which he seems to ultimately view as both formally disturbing and compelling. See Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 217 and Pindell, *Diaspora*, 14.
[144] Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 44.

racial stereotypes; it calls for the recognition of them. The work generates a productive discomfort for the viewer, forcing her to reflect upon the complicated nature of history and subjectivity.

FROM SUBSERVIENCE TO SUBVERSION

Rosana Paulino, Latifa Echakhch, Tracey Moffatt, Xaviera Simmons and Renee Cox simulate and refer to further discomfort of a physical or psychological nature, along with its empowering consequences. As in *Casulos* and *Tecelãs*, Paulino weaves in and around her figures in an earlier series entitled *Bastidores* (*Embroidery Frames*), but does so with black thread, thus emphasizing the tragic and funereal nature of the subject matter. The series of twelve embroidered portraits refer to stories of domestic abuse told to Paulino by her sister, a social worker.145 They consist of photographs of Paulino's own family members transferred onto pieces of cloth, in which she stitched over the subjects' eyes, mouths and throats. Her media – needle, thread and cloth – is typically associated with the domestic realm of women and used to mend and restore one's items. Paulino contrastingly uses them to represent torture and violence. By converting the purposes of these tools, Paulino suggests the home (like the cocoon) can be both a place of comfort or security and one of terror or punishment. Also, as Kimberly Cleveland suggests, "not only does this work speak to [conditions] in one's own home, but also to the large number of female Afro-Brazilian domestic servants who suffer physical abuse at the hands of

145 Cleveland, *New Center*, 260.

their employers."146 Paulino's choice in banal materials and basic colors (white background, grey imagery and black details) minimally produces a dramatic tonal contrast and visual effect, and therefore underlines the paradoxical and inconspicuous nature of domestic violence.

Figure 44: Rosana Paulino*, Bastidores (Embroidery Frames)*, 1997

Further, the restraint of the color scheme echoes the manner in which Paulino confines her subjects. They are unable to see, speak or bear witness, as the frames encircle and effectively imprison them. Likened to mug shots, *Bastidores* implies that the women have been penalized in their own homes. Moreover, by using vignettes of her relatives, Paulino suggests that many others have suffered similarly, others that could easily include her family members. On the one hand, the documentation of the victims' experiences through the bodies of others both utilizes and undermines the reputed credibility of black and white photography. Michael Pastoureau explains,

> in the area of information and documentation…despite considerable progress in color photography beginning in the 1950s, the idea persisted until almost the

146 Ibid. Also, see Santos, *Brazilian,* 307. Santos states , "Some of the common threads that ran through…testimonies [of domestic workers] included sexual harassment, sexual violence (rape and other abuses), excessively long work days,, unsafe, unhealthy, and hazardous work conditions, delay in salary payment, and ongoing violation of their labor rights in general."

> present day that black-and-white photography was precise, accurate, and faithful to the reality of beings and things….147

On the other hand, Paulino's technique also conveys a sense of empathy for the victims. The simulation of pain and torture on the figures of Paulino's kin illustrates "the rhetoric of the body" as discussed by Nelly Richard. She states,

> The body is the stage on which this division [of the public and the private] primarily leaves its mark. It is the meeting-place of the individual…and the collective…. By inflicting upon themselves these emblems of the wounded body, [artists] appeal to pain as a way of approaching that borderline between individual and collective experience…sharing in one's own flesh the same signs of social disadvantage as the other unfortunates. Voluntary pain simply legitimates one's incorporation into the community of those who have been harmed in some way—as if the self-inflicted marks of chastisement in the artists' body and the marks of suffering in the national body, as if pain and its subject, could unite in the same scar.148

In this sense, Paulino's virtual use of her relatives' bodies transgresses the boundaries between a black female collective and the actual victims' private lives. As a feature of Paulino's art practice, they also reveal hidden instances of domestic violence in the public realm of an exhibition. Further, Paulino's voluntary (symbolic) torture of her own loved ones is a poignant expression of her sacrifice for and identification with the abused.

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147 Pastoureau, *Black*, 178. He continues, "In many countries, for example, until very recently official documents and identity papers had to be accompanied by black-and-white photographs and not color ones." Coincidentally, two of the photographs in Paulino's *Bastidores* include numbers because they were originally printed for identity cards. See Cleveland, *New Center*, 260.

148 Richard, *Margins*, 65-66.

Figure 45: Latifa Echakhch, *Erratum*, 2004

Moroccan-born artist Latifa Echakhch demonstrates a possible repercussion of mistreatment in *Erratum* (2004). Echakhch's installation—shards of thrown Moroccan tea glasses lying on the floor—is a displacement of domestic materials from the private sphere that expresses anger in the public realm. In contrast to Paulino, this strategic use of objects in a gallery space illustrates the view that "because of our history and our anxiety around blackness—even black people's [anxiety]—we're not willing to locate Being anywhere but in recognizable forms, like the body. We're not willing to locate it in a psychological space."149 Echakhch therefore locates Being in the psychological and literal space of an imagined situation.

149 Artist Ellen Gallagher quoted in Fusselman, *Disembodies*.

Critic Holland Cotter compared her gesture to the creation of Richard Serra's "splash" pieces. Like thrown molten lead, *Erratum* is a potentially dangerous act of "raw aggression and physicality, combined with a self-conscious awareness of material."[150]

Figure 46: Richard Serra "splashing" molten lead, 1969

Echakhch's work is also comparable to other forms of minimal art. The hurled glasses call to mind Carl Andre's "scatter" pieces, John Chamberlain's arbitrarily crushed steel works and especially sculptural pieces by Robert Morris who "provocatively placed or scattered at the viewer's feet the cubes, slabs, plinths, soil, steam that made up his minimalist sculptural vocabulary" and "forced the viewer to re-experience the work's construction." [151] Both Echakhch and Morris exhibit commercially produced objects using chance strategies and minimal gestures, such as dropping the items on the floor. The resultant artworks "obliquely allude to the human body through their response to gravity" in their execution.[152]

[150] Cotter, *Flow*.
[151] Berger, *Minimal Politics*, 8; Meyer, *Minimalism*, 29.
[152] Blessing, *Collection Online.*

Figure 47: Robert Morris, *Untitled (Pink Felt)*, 1970

Figural abstraction in Echakhch's work also recalls the practices of many African American artists in the 1940s in which abstract expressionism was a "vehicle of integration."153 That is, the artists viewed the anonymity of the style as beneficial in their efforts to avoid race-based burdens of social responsibilities and realism in their work. Nonetheless, as Ann Gibson indicates,

> …even though a number of the African American artists…rejected the "primitive" in favor of abstraction, they did not necessarily reject their African heritage; its submerged presence in their work is frequent and well integrated with their subject matter. Rather, abstraction offered the status of the "universal" for ancestral imagery by protecting it from the racialization that was usually read into recognizably African or African American images."

Likewise, Echakhch blurs the specificity of her objects by shattering them in *Erratum*. Despite the work's affinity with minimalism and its notable absence of black and white, the broken pieces of glass "are not neutral; they are redolent with associations

153 Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 71.

and historical allusions."154 As a subversive act of agency similar to a maid purposefully breaking or chipping dishes, Echakhch's production of *Erratum* literally and figuratively deconstructs the materials as symbols of gender roles, nationalism, domestic labor, and the commodification of culture, rendering them no longer functional.155 The title suggests the work is a denunciation of socio-historical "errors," making the piece a form of rejection on several levels.

First, the work is a rejection of remnants of colonialism and Orientalism as symbolized by tea and commercial reproductions of Moroccan tea glasses. *Erratum* is also a rejection of prescribed gender roles in Moroccan culture and domestic spaces. As teashops are "socially significant masculine spaces" in which women are forbidden and tea service is an "art form" thus performed by men in public, the destruction of tea glasses suggests the instability of gender roles in society and the household.156 Finally, the installation is a rejection of the fictions of nationalism and notions of authenticity. In addition to the construction of patriarchal and exclusionary national identities, Erratum points to the deception of national symbols, such as Moroccan tea; it is a significant, ubiquitous cultural element in Echakhch's birthplace, yet its introduction to Morocco was by British traders in the early 1800s and today its main provider is China.157

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154 Berger, *Minimal Politics*, 8.

155 See McClintock, *Imperial*, 272. She states, "In colonial homes, African women perform myriad such small acts of refusal: in work slowdowns, in surreptitiously taking or spoiling food, in hiding objects, in chipping plates, in scolding or punishing children, in revealing domestic secrets, in countless acts of revenge."

156 Sudakov, *The Social Significance*, 38, 58.

157 Njoku, *Culture and Customs*, 83; *Morocco tea imports*.

Figure 48: Tracey Moffatt (in collaboration with Gary Hillberg), *Lip*, 1999

The racialization and gendering of domestic labor and roles suggested by Echakhch and the subsequent production and consumption of milk from black women's breasts explored in Paulino and Walker's artworks correlates in the original province of "Mammy."[158] Although she was not quite the mother of her white charges, she was a maternal figure vis-à-vis her lactational labor. Nonetheless, the social connotation of the moniker indicates it is more than just an "alteration of mama."[159] In a sense, the simple transfer of vowels between mommy and mammy signifies the denigration of the

[158] See Kimberly Wallace-Sanders's book "Mammy" for a thorough explanation of how, in the U.S., the word *mammy* was originally a "reference to a slave woman caring for white children" in 1810. Around 1890, after the introduction of the Aunt Jemima trademark, mammy became homogenized and figured as "heavyset black woman serving food to white families" in popular visual culture. Wallace-Sanders, *Mammy*, 4, 10.

[159] *Mammy.*

historical role of the black woman in the white household. As Mammy phonetically approaches terms such as mammary, mammoth and mammal, black domestic servants figure as obese serviceable creatures in the social imagination and the scope of cinematic and televisual portrayals.

Australian Aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt (in collaboration with Gary Hillberg), compiled such representations from Hollywood films from the 1930s to 1970s to produce an 11-minute montage entitled *Lip* (1999). Because her mother was a black domestic servant, Moffatt stated the work is quite personal.160 This sentiment also suggests the video does not function only as a presentation of the misuse and depreciation of black actresses or servants. It also a depiction of how those women often used the roles to their advantage. While many black actresses had to play maids to be cast in Hollywood films, these largely unknown women had the ability to steal scenes from famous white actresses through their skilled delivery of a few lines of "lip."

Accompanied by a soundtrack of Aretha Franklin's anthems, "Chain of Fools" and "Think," Moffatt's video consists of numerous scenes of black women performing various household duties while, at times, making irreverent or impudent remarks to their white mistresses. The montage of cleaning, cooking and answering phones and doors, among other tasks, attests to the limited opportunities and paradoxical situations for black female performers who acted as a form of work, thus avoiding the work they acted. (Un)fortunately, they were well compensated for the perpetuation the Mammy stereotype, more so than they would have been as actual maids. Hattie McDaniel recognized this

160 *Tracey Moffatt*.

advantage and famously declared, “Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If l didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one!"161

While the currently availability and complexity of roles for black actresses is still limited, particularly in comparison to those for white actresses, the options are less obvious reiterations of Mammy.162 As of late, black men have taken over the character. Comedic actors – notably Tyler Perry, Eddie Murphy and Martin Lawrence– have donned fat suits to perpetuate the Mammy stereotype for larger sums of money than Hattie McDaniel could have hoped.163 This unfortunate transformation highlights one of the many disparities between social groups in the U.S.. In the case of black actors' mammified drag performances, gender is the overarching factor determining unequal levels of compensation and stardom, but *Lip* provides insight into how categories of class function in concert with gender (and race and sexuality) to have profound social effect.

As much of the footage illustrates, black servants occupy “outsider-within locations” in white households.164 Their presence marks boundaries within their

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161 Bogle, *Toms*, 82.

162 While black women rarely play maids in contemporary television programs and films, elements of the Mammy stereotype have been retained in many of their roles. “Inherent in the Mammy figure is the myth of a Black matriarchy,” and portrayals of the domineering, single mother continues to provide work for black actresses. Haug, *Dirt*, 39.

163 Tyler Perry has reaped hundreds of millions of dollars from films, in which he often plays the role of Mabel 'Madea' Simmons, a large, aggressive black grandmother. Likewise, in his *Nutty* Professor films, Eddie Murphy plays the several characters, including Anna Pearl 'Mama' Jensen Klump and Ida Mae 'Granny' Jensen, both overweight black female characters. Finally, Martin Lawrence's *Big Momma's House,* in which he plays an FBI agent disguised as a rotund southern matriarch, was successful enough to bring about a sequel, and *Big Mommas: Like Father, Like Son,* to be released in 2011.

164 Collins, *Fighting Words,* 179.

relationships with white employers, due not only to economic disparity, but also to an imbalance of power. As Patricia Hill Collins has stated,

> dual meanings of economic class exist.…This shift in perspective that both views class relations in more than purely economic terms and generates class categories from actual lived experience creates space to examine how social hierarchies construct groups of class relationships with visible economic dimensions…. [In other words,] class does not describe a "thing" but rather a relationship among social groups unequal in power.165

Lip highlights the oppositional nature of the relationship between the white mistress and the black maid. Hollywood popularized the stereotype of Mammy, originally developed to contrast with the feminine ideal of white patriarchy, that is, a submissive, pious and chaste housewife.166 The Mammy archetype works to simultaneously justify the subjugation of black women and elevate the social status of white women.167 Moffatt's clips demonstrate how this repeated juxtaposition of bodies and behavior in films "accentuates the contradictions of race and class in feminism, with privileged women of one class using the labor of another woman to escape aspects of sexism."168 In several scenes, the black maid's presence frees the white mistresses to dine, date men, fuss over her appearance, attend parties, or simply lounge by the pool and

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165 Collins, *Fighting Words*, 112-115.
166 Haug, *Dirt*, 47-48.
167 Michael Harris also contends, "…the preponderance of 'mammy' images in black caricature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries partially was an attempt to masquerade white male renegade sexual desire… [and Mammy's] invention can be seen as a strategy to regain control and the service of black women loosened from the bonds of slavery." Harris, *Memories*, 35.
168 Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 55.

complain about "how "other people have loyal help. Why can't [they]?" or how they are "being exploited by [their] help."169

These imbalanced and exploitative relations between black maids and white mistresses further allude to the meaning of class as a type of behavior reflecting sophistication and grace. For example, in Brazil, black maids often feel their white female employers treat them as mentally inferior. The employers of verbally and physically abused servants,

> might… have a university degree but they frequently lacked 'good manners', displayed 'ignorance' when dealing with [their servants] and behaved as 'monsters' that yelled and banged doors at them…Reverting their employers' views, maids connected whiteness to ugliness (not necessarily physical but moral ugliness), evil and exploitation."170

In *Lip*, Moffatt showcases the contempt of several black maids for their employers. Many scenes "stage a battle of wills between the black maid and her white mistress, in which it is generally the black woman who gets the last word."171 It is the statement of the last word or lip that becomes a subversive act of agency, one of the few ways that black servants were able to rebel and express their disdain. While these moments of power might seem limited in social effect, Moffatt's accumulation of them amounts to an effective critique of the Mammy stereotypes that figure black women as deferential and servile in response to an employer's incessant demands.

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169 Moffatt, *Lip*.
170 Rezende, *Linking*, 767-768.
171 Smith, *Lip*, 213.

Figure 49: Xaviera Simmons, *One Day and Back Then (Standing)*, 2007

African American artist Xaviera Simmons visualizes other conflicts, particularly those in and around blackness and social status or societal respect, in *One Day and Back Then (Standing)*(2007). In this image, Simmons poses in black from head to toe, except her lips, which are bright red. She paints her body black and wears black clothing, tights and shoes. Simmons well-dressed appearance in tandem with offensive costuming (her blackface, clownish lips and exaggerated Afro), calls to mind the post-slavery experiences of black women who strove to challenge negative imagery of themselves. bell hooks recounts how during the Black Reconstruction (1867-77),

Those black women suffered most whose behavior best exemplified that of a “lady." A black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mud-slinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts. They reminded her that in the eyes of the white public she would never be seen as worthy of consideration or respect.[172]

Simmons appears to mock and contradict the effects of her stylish ensemble by juxtaposing it with parodic make-up and hair set against a rural background. These contrasts exemplify a “double-consciousness,” an internal struggle black women might face when they recognize how social stereotypes play into (mis)perceptions of their appearance.[173]

Simmons emphasizes this contradiction with her use of black, which represents two divergent senses of the color. Her clothing is in

> designer black…. [It is] simultaneously a sober and refined black, an elegant and functional black, a joyous, luminous black, in short, a modem black…. For many designers and for much of the general public over the course of the decades black has increasingly become the emblematic color of modernity.”[174]

Simmons parallels the contradictory nature of modernity with that of black womanhood by also using black as a symbol of racist practices, namely blackface.

If, as Michael Rogin states, “blackface is a form of cross-dressing, in which one puts on the insignias of a sex, class or race that stands in binary opposition to one’s own,”

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[172] hooks *Ain't*, 55.
[173] Du Bois 3. “Double consciousness” partially refers to the theory that black people in the U.S. often have the sense of seeing themselves through the eyes of others.
[174] Pastoureau, *Black*, 188-89.

what does it mean for a black woman to blacken up?175 In light of the difference between her true skin color and the color of the paint, is Simmons in blackface to point up her difference from or opposition to racist caricatures? Like "whites who black up, [does she] call attention to the gap between role and ascribed identity by playing what… [she] cannot be," that is, a clownish figure or aberrant "other"?176 Alternatively, does she impress on the viewer that dark skin and curly hair are refined features that her dress complements? Or perhaps in this image Simmons "attempts to come to terms with a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to minstrel and mammy images… [and] reflects an aspect of black reality—namely, the real desire of blacks to look for themselves, even in the unpleasant or unfulfilling images that society reflects back to them."177 Simmons not only looks for herself, she finds herself hidden among the reeds and looks at herself in the negative imagery.

Moreover, Simmons' blackened skin attests to the manner in which cross-dressing or

> the disruption of social norms is not always subversive…. Indeed, privileged groups can, on occasion, display their privilege precisely by the extravagant display of their right to ambiguity. In short, the staging of symbolic disorder by the privileged can merely preempt challenges by those who do not possess the power to stage ambiguity with comparable license or authority. 178

175 Rogin, *Blackface*, 30.
176 Ibid., 34.
177 Kemp, *If Sambo*, 103-4. Kemp's quote is in reference to artwork by David Huffman.
178 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 68-69.

Such was the case in minstrel performances during and after slavery in the U.S., and such is the case when heterosexual men cross-dress as women for comic purposes.179 Thus, while Simmons' is free to remove the black paint, its removal would not represent her freedom from the negative stereotypes it represents.

Nonetheless, Simmons does claim her right to express ambiguity on other levels. Photography as an inherently anachronistic medium becomes an effective means to simultaneously depict the future *(One Day)* and the past *(Back Then)*. As Victor Burgin states, "the photograph…has, instantaneously and forever, isolated 'frozen' a fragment of the spatiotemporal continuum…."180 Further, this bygone moment is always situated within a future one: the viewers' context. Simmons, as a Janus-like figure, replicates this condition in *One Day*. She looks into the past and captures a historical caricature within an elegant, modern depiction of a black woman that looks into the eyes of future viewers. On one level, Simmons' portrayal of disparate moments in time and senses of blackness suggests interpellations of black females are constitutive of past and present (mis)representations. Moreover, Simmons seems to bleakly imply that the black female figure is affixed to historical, stereotypical characterizations that are destined to haunt it in the future. She alludes to Homi Bhabha's contention that ambivalence is what "gives the…stereotype its currency [to ensure] its repeatability in changing historical and

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179 Ibid. McClintock uses the example of "the Monty Python television series, [in which] men ritually cross-dress as women (very often across class boundaries), but women seldom appear on the show, let alone as men. People of color are singularly absent. In this way, the show's irreverent disruption of social norms effectively affirms a privileged white male heterosexuality."

180 Firstenberg, *Autonomy*, 320.

discursive conjunctures."181 On another level, the ambiguity of the image, which Simmons embodies, also indicates her identity and subjectivity are just as undetermined, contradictory and thus unfixed.

Figure 50: Renee Cox, *Housewife (Discreet Charm of the Bougies* series), 2008

Renee Cox also photographically situates the past in the present in *Housewife* (2008). Her image comments on earlier portrayals of black and white women, such as those in Moffatt's *Lip* and specifically that in Manet's *Olympia*, by turning them on their head. While not in blackface, Cox crosses the dress and roles of the women in Manet's

[181] Bhabha, *The Other Question*, 71.

painting in a color-coded reworking of their socio-economical statuses. As shown above, Manet painted Victorine Meurent's white nude figure reclining on a chaise longue, with a black ribbon tied around her neck, attended by a white-uniformed Laure. In Cox's adaptation, she sits upright on a sofa wearing a stylish all-black suit with a white pearl necklace, as a blond white woman dressed in a maid's uniform waits on her. Instead of presenting the flowers placed in the background (which are illusionistically next to Cox's head like Olympia's flower), the servant submissively leans over a large white poodle to provide cocktail service. Cox thus replaces the eroticism of Manet's black cat and its erect tail with the fidelity of a dog.

Her replacement of clothing recalls Simmons's "designer black," but moreover it also speaks to contemporary social codes based on histories of dress and labor. As Laura Pérez observed, "the uniform of the servant or nanny is likely to connote women of color in particular, while the power suit for women is more likely to call up images of Euro-American or 'Westernized' women of particular classes."[182] Further, "the black suit [is a] symbol of discreet and practical elegance… [The] domination of black can be observed in… [the clothing of] those connected with money…and power."[183] These are likely indications of why Cox refrained from depicting her housewife like Meurent, nude on the sofa, thus foreclosing interpretations of a black woman as a prostitute or a hypersexual "Jezebel." Rather than on the sofa, she inserts her nude figure in the background in an earlier self-portrait, *Yo Mama* from 1993. This image slyly indicates that unlike the

[182] Pérez, *Chicana Art*, 51.
[183] Pastoureau, *Black*, 189

means of a housewife, it is not the work of others, but her own, by which Cox attained her socio-economic status.[184] Once again in opposition to *Olympia* and the leisurely housewife, Cox's towering nude figure—standing in stilettos while holding her son—indicates success, security and strength.

Housewife not only opposes *Olympia*, but with the appearance of a well-dressed black female figure, it also introduces a new element into Manet's schema that speaks to perceptions, realities and possibilities of black and white women's social statuses and domestic roles. Cox portrays the clothed black woman as a lady rather than a laborer. The white woman is no longer nude, but instead dressed as a worker of a domestic, not sexual, nature. Finally, the nude figure is Cox's own with her child as an indication of maternalism, rather than prostitution. Moreover, the composition centers the dog, whose presence operates on multiple levels relative to each figure. In addition to the service of the maid for her employer, the poodle also suggests the loyalty between the housewife and her husband, or perhaps the obedience of the housewife to her (absent) husband. The dog's appearance might also refer to an unconditional love of a mother for her child as conveyed in the background portrait. Through this reworking and reversal of Manet's elements, *Housewife* proposes a complex view of race and class-based relations that stem from female reinforcement, rather than sexuality.

Housewife's medium, that is, photography rather than painting, signals another reversal of *Olympia*. This shift recalls historical contentions of art critics that deemed photography a non-art and subordinate to painting. Moreover, photography is inherently

[184] Also underscoring Cox's success as an artist, the setting of the photograph is her actual residence.

an act of reversal. The process literally turns a negative—an image that shows black and white tones in reverse—into a positive print. *Olympia* thus represents an adverse portrayal of nineteenth-century French society that Cox reverses and transforms into *Housewife*, a gainful image of and for herself.

Cox's image also links the historical socio-visual effects and implications of housework and photography. As Anne McClintock avers, in Victorian society,

> …a wife's vocation was not only to create a clean and productive family but also to ensure the skilled erasure of every sign of her work. Her life took shape around the contradictory imperative of laboring while rendering her labor invisible. Her success as a wife depended on her skill in the art of both working and appearing not to work. Her parlor game - the ritualized moment of appearing fresh, calm and idle before the scrutiny of husbands, fathers and visitors - was a theatrical performance of leisure, the ceremonial negation of her work. For most women from the still-disorganized middling classes, I suggest, idleness was less the absence of work than a conspicuous labor of leisure.185

The contradictions of this performance or "labor of leisure" evokes those required to produce the artifice of a professional photograph, such as *Housewife*. As McClintock also states,

> By the 1860s, photography was big business. People, most often women, were posed before artificial backdrops, often exotic and incongruously out of keeping with the sitter's world, but expressive nonetheless of fantasies of imperial control over space, landscape and interior…. Photographers relied heavily on props, exotic decor and elaborate backdrops. In these domestic interiors, the new middle class posed against elaborately staged public scenes of empire…. The immobility of the sitter conceals behind the surface of the photograph the violence of the colonial encounter. 186

185 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 162.
186 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 125-126.

A photographer thus constructs a scene of fantasy that masks the reality of the sitter and any signs of the work (or exploitation) its production necessitates. As in the middle-class lifestyle, the desired effect of the staged photograph depends on the erasure of its labor. To create *Housewife,* Cox required costumes, decoration, lighting and assistants to produce a portrait that comments on the pretenses of women in high society. As *Housewife* masks Cox's lifestyle and labor, it critically assesses women's lifestyles that devaluate labor.187 Further, one can also assume a similar process went on behind the scene of *Olympia*, despite its medium. Manet hired models and staged a scene to construct an image, not to document the actual lives of Victorine and Laure. *Olympia* is a representation of the lower class in the late-1800s that now represents the reverse: the highest class of modern art.

In conclusion, each of these artists visually affirms Brian Wallis's observation that "if colonialism and ethnographic exploitation depend on appropriation, one must acknowledge that what is taken can always be taken back."[188] By rethinking and reworking imagery and conditions of the past (and unfortunately the present), they deconstruct binaries and essentialisms of race, gender and class, thus visualizing the complex conditions of black women's work in their own. They creatively interrogate social injustices and fallacies, thereby "doing service" to and asserting the value of the role of black women's labor in the history of societies, economies and art.

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[187] Cox has stated that her neighbors and their lifestyles inspired the character and scenes she portrays in the *Discreet Charm of the Bougies* series. See Cox, *Lectures.*
[188] Wallis, *Black Bodies,* 106.

Chapter Three: On Fertile Ground: Black Maternalism as an Aesthetic (Re)Production

The image within the image of Renee Cox's *Housewife* from the previous chapter—that is, *Yo Mama*—ties in with theme of the following discussion, as black motherhood was its inspiration. In fact, Cox set out to create her *Yo Mama* series (1992-96) after several colleagues expressed the view that motherhood would derail her artistic career.189 Cox disregarded this notion and disregarding, which notably mirrors a taboo critic Lucy Lippard recognized in 1976. In her essay, "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art," Lippard noted,

> no women dealing with their own bodies or biographies have introduced pregnancy or childbirth as a major image…for individual Conceptual artists, this mental and physical condition unique to women exists as a curious void…. [Is it] because women artists have traditionally either refused to have children or have hidden them away in order to be taken seriously in a world that accuses wives and mothers of being part-time artists? Or because the biological aspect of female creation is an anathema to women who want to be recognized for their art?...None of these explanations seem valid….Perhaps procreativity is the next taboo to be tackled, one that might make clearer the elusive factors that divide body art by women from that by men.[190]

Whether valid or not, based on Cox's experience that reasoning does exist. *Yo Mama* therefore confronts notions about the artistic relevance of maternalism. It also presents a racialized view of motherhood that has not only been unrecognized in the artistic sphere, but also denounced in the media.

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189 Cox, *Lectures*, 2008. This occurrence took place during Cox's participation in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program in 199?.
190 Lippard, *The Pains*, 256.

Figure 51: Renee Cox*, Yo Mama (The Sequel), 1996*

The series includes various scenarios in which Cox pictures herself either pregnant or with child(ren) in her home, on the beach, while breastfeeding, as a "Mamadonna," and so on. She thus offers the viewer a poignant take on black motherhood that negates the derogatory, colloquial use of the phrase "Yo Mama." Often used as a form of insult in black American culture, the phrase "Yo Mama" puts forward the black mother as a target of ridicule and presumably the source of one's faults. It reinforces the already-present controlling image of the "Bad Black Mother," that persists

in the U.S. and other nations. Cox's use of the phrase as her title thus touches on a divisive aspect of feminist politics in the U.S. and other nations.

Figure 52: Renee Cox, *Yo Mama at Home,* 1992

For instance, Brazilian anthropologist Sônia Beatriz dos Santos observed that the major differences in political activism between *feminismo negro* (black feminism) and conventional feminism in Brazil relate to "labor exploitation and the suppression of… reproductive rights and health."[191] The latter concern stems from negative representations of black women as "primarily responsible for…violence [in their communities], since in official discourse they produce this violence by having children who are doomed to later

[191] Santos, *Brazilian*, 302.

become delinquents." [192] These images contribute to the vulnerability and discrimination against black women in Brazilian society and especially the healthcare system. Accordingly, this chapter follows a discussion of domestic labor to consider the complexities of another form of the labor, that is, childbirth, and related themes and stereotypes in black women's artwork.

Controlling images, such as the Matriarch, Welfare Queen and Sapphire, have besieged black mothers and wives in the U.S., and figured them as the root of socio-economic problems found not only in black families and communities, but also entire nations. Although white Americans prospered by forcing black women's bodies into maternity and maternal care during the slavery era, after emancipation, they often denigrated black motherhood. Patricia Hill Collins avers,

> While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch represents the "bad" Black mother.[193]

No longer profitable for the white population, black mothers, and by extension their children, became viewed as societal burdens. Similarly, in Brazil, whether the populace celebrates or maligns black mothers depends on which racial group benefits from their childbirth. Kia Lilly Caldwell explains,

> While their biological reproduction of black offspring has traditionally been maligned for blackening the Brazilian population, their role in the reproduction of

[192] Santos, *Brazilian*, 88.
[193] Collins, *Black*, 75.

mestiço or mulatto offspring has been hailed as a credit to individual families as well as to the nation.[194]

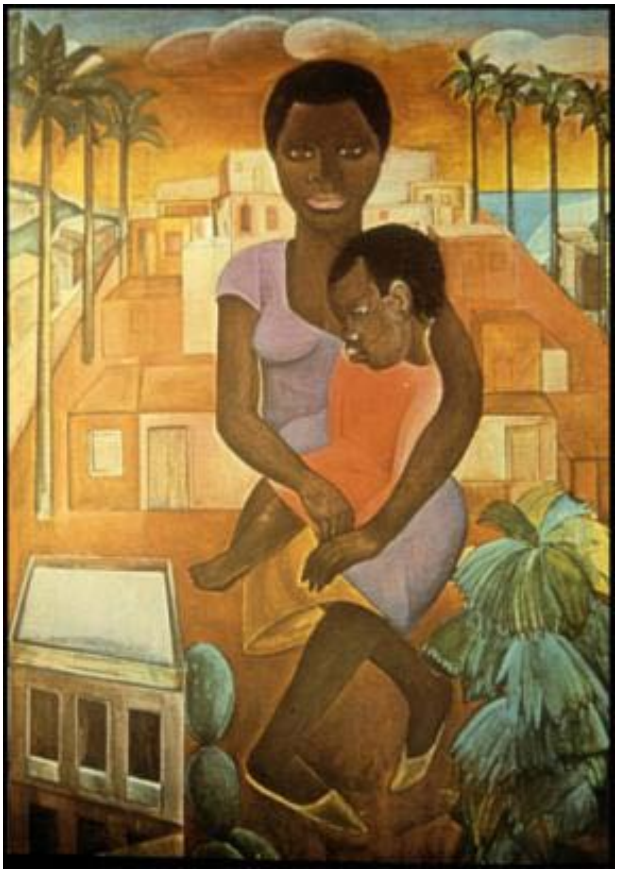

Figure 53: Lasar Segall, Red Hill, 1926

In Brazil, along with the U.S. and other nations, black mothers have thus been blamed for a range of societal ills related to drugs, welfare, violence and so on, rather than racist labor practices, unjust healthcare policies, and underfunded educational systems, among other inequities. This persistent form of scapegoating has inspired artworks by Rosana Paulino and other black female artists, specifically Sheila Pree Bright, Carrie Mae Weems, Wangechi Mutu and Zanele Muholi.

[194] Caldwell, *Negras*, 40.

Figure 54: Lasar Segall, Black Mother, 1930

Their imagery both celebrates experiences and condemns perceptions of black maternalism, offering the viewer a varied take on the theme. Rather than hackneyed portrayals of black mothers as aggressive women who continually bear children with men they emasculate and chase off, their works consider varied realities. They reflect the everyday challenges and emotional complexities of black family life that is at once commonplace and culturally specific. They also contemplate the black female body as a site of sociopolitical struggle. Movements have been launched and legal battles have been waged in the public arena regarding matters, such as contraception, sterilization and reproductive justice, which largely affect women of color. In both cases, the artists create

powerful imagery through diverse media—sculpture, photography, drawing and collage—that effectively communicate the material and psychical effects of black motherhood.

Figure 55: Ismael Nery, Mãe e Filhos (Mother and Children), undated

In doing so, these depictions counter or complete the contexts of several works created by such esteemed Brazilians artists as Laser Segall, Ismael Nery, Candido Portinari and Emiliano Di Cavalcanti. These images usually portray the black woman as a single mother alone or with her child(ren). This is not to say that single motherhood is an entirely negative or undesirable situation. However, in societies where intersections of race, class and gender create and compound disadvantages for black mothers, stereotypes

generate false notions about their circumstances. In particular, Brazilian notions of the black mother are analogous to controlling images in the U.S. According to anthropologist Sônia Beatriz dos Santos, “the bad mother type constitutes a mixture of the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel” Because of her presumed neglect and that she populates her community, the general public blames her for any problems within her surroundings.

Figure 56: Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, *Maternidade (Motherhood)*, 1972

The painting *Red Hill* by Lasar Segall, along with *Maternidade* and *Mulata* by Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, visualizes these associations. The black female figures sit in the center of the planes looming over cityscapes. The portraits imply that these mothers oversee and represent the areas behind them. They are therefore answerable for all

activities that occur within them. In a sense, the works are visual extensions of Daniel Moynihan's infamous 1965 report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," in which the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor's "central thesis was that the black family was crumbling and that a major part of the blame lay with the black matriarchy extant in the black community."[195]

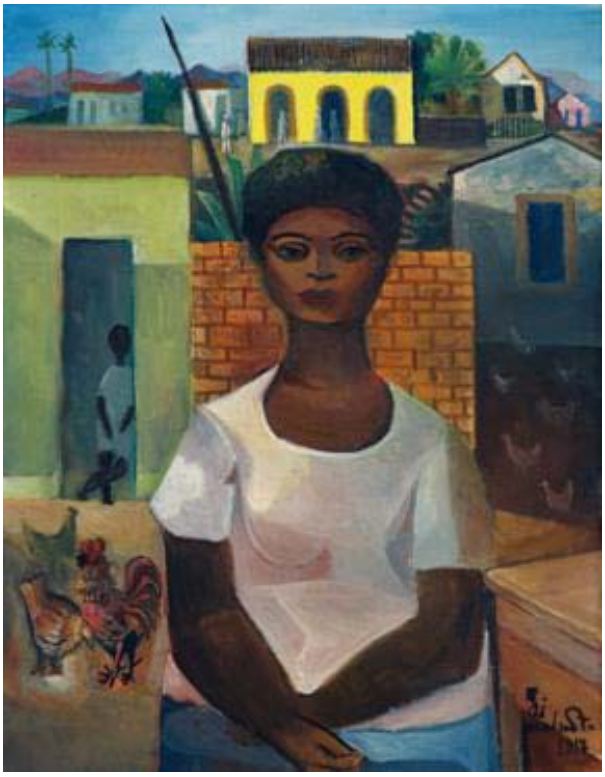

Figure 57: Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, *Mulata*, 1952

Just as Moynihan overlooked key aspects of racism in the U.S. that in fact generated his "evidence," the placement of the black female figures by these Brazilian artists prohibits a full view of the background, as if the viewer is not to be concerned with

[195] Staples, *The Myth*, 30.

any contextual circumstances or details. The artist does not allow her to see past the black woman, who is figured as the embodiment of her surroundings. While the black mother in Brazil

> (real or symbolic)…has been the great generator in perpetuating Afro-Brazilian cultural values and transmitting them to the new generation, [the stereotype of the Black Matriarch ultimately] symbolizes Black women's failure to fulfill their traditional "womanly" duties at home, which contribute to social problems in Black civil society.[196]

Moreover, the constant portrayal of the black mother as single reinforces ideas that her marital status is due to her character, or a type of behavior similar to that of the so-called Sapphire, "the epitome of the overbearing, tyrannical, emasculating Matriarch" who eventually drives men away.[197]


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Figure 58: Candido Portinari, *Bahian Woman*, 1936

[196] Gonzalez, *The Black Woman*, 316; Collins, *Black Feminist*, 75.
[197] Farrington, *Creating*, 23. Also see hooks, *Ain't*, and Collins, *Black Feminist*

FROM THE GROUND UP

Rather than being the cause of men's absence, the black female figures in Rosana Paulino's *Colônia* (*Colony*) (2006) appear to be relying on each other *because* the men are absent. The installation consists of numerous armless, multiple-breasted figures akin to *nkisi* figures, which serve as forms of protection in Central African cultures. The *Rainha* (*Queen*) possesses a mound of eyes in place of legs. She is perched atop a large white pedestal where she is able to observe the other members of the colony, which are the *Operárias* (*Workers*) and *Soldados* (*Soldiers*).

Figure 59: Rosana Paulino, *Rainha* (*Queen*) from *Colônia* (*Colony*), 2006

With their torsos much like that of the *Queen*, these other members are primarily defined by their lower halves. As for the *Workers*, Paulino covered them with knob-like protrusions to carry spools of white thread used in their labor. The spike-haired or helmeted *Soldiers'* lower halves are also covered, but with pieces of colorful ribbons tied to hold various shards of rock, wood, glass and metal. They are further outfitted for battle with the chains around their necks and waists. Similar to the manner of *nkisi* sculptures, the figurines seem to bear these fragments to ward off evil spirits and protect a community.

Due to these aspects of African cultural retention, the appearance of *Colônia* recalls a *quilombo*, a settlement formed primarily by Afro-Brazilians who escaped slavery during colonial times. Much like the Maroons of North America and the Caribbean, *quilombolas* (residents of quilombos) built up formidable military regimes to defend themselves against continual attacks by the Portuguese army. Paulino's choice as a title thus ironically points to Brazil's colonial past as it denotes her visualized resistance to the oppression of that era. In her alternative version, Paulino features black Brazilian female occupants who have collective ownership of their space, much like that which *quilombolas* have had since colonial times.

Figure 60: Rosana Paulino, *Soldados* (*Soldiers*) from *Colônia* (*Colony*), 2006

In another sense, *Colônia*'s placement throughout the floor of the gallery space and the otherworldly appearances of its members gives the impression of an insect colony, that is, a physically connected structure formed by a social body.[198] In other words, in light of Brazil's phenotypic racial classifications, these figures refer to societal connections of black Brazilian women based on physicality.

[198] Kimberly Cleveland has also written that Paulino "explores the association of female with insect in several works… [For *Colônia*,] Paulino bases the installation around mythic concepts of the female-insect association, and uses a beehive as the setting to discuss gender roles and social hierarchy." Cleveland, *New Center*, 268. See also Franklin Espath Pedroso's illuminating essay on *Colônia* entitled "A colméia como metafora" ("The beehive as metaphor").

Figure 61: Rosana Paulino, *Operárias* (*Workers*), 2006

Colônia also recalls notions of *mães negras* (black mothers), "mothers of the nation," or myths of Candomblé's matriarchal societies. The figure of a spiritual or historical black mammy reflects a "nostalgia for an innocent past" in which everyone knows their place.[199] Afro-Brazilian priestesses use these concepts to their advantage, which results in a paradoxical position for the Afro-Brazilian woman in the national consciousness. On the one hand, the "black great-grandmother" instills a sense of "some bourgeois Brazilian comfort."[200] The black women that run the *terreiros* (Candomblé temples) are conscious of this form of projection by Euro-Brazilians. They know that the

[199] ibid.
[200] Matory, *Black*, 203.

Black Mother is essentially an idealization by which they can socially and economically elevate their community. As anthropologist J. Lorand Matory observed,

> many of the chief priestesses of Candomblé are not snuggly or affectionate at all, and more than a few are childless by choice. For someone not in search of a conventional "mother" figure, the description of their manner that might first come to mind is "executive."[201]

On the other hand, by being a cultural construction of white males, the *mãe negra* is hardly a true matriarch. She is devoid of sovereignty, and is merely an incubator at the service of the ostensibly white Portuguese "fathers of the nation." Further, in contemporary contexts, the *mãe negra* is essentially a Mammy. The affection that white families convey for her and

> the inclusion of the *mãe negra* into the domestic life of white families, and by extension the nation, is premised on relations of economic exchange…[It also] underscores intergenerational patterns of economic subordination…[and] multigenerational practices of labor exchange that closely resembled those existing during the slave era.[202]

Thus, one might question the intentions or effects of Paulino's *Colônia*. Does the work perpetuate the myth of the "strong black Superwoman?" Many scholars–bell hooks, Michele Wallace, Patricia Morton and Patricia Hill Collins, to name a few–have observed that black women have often bought into this myth (as have black men). They have

> embraced the label matriarch because it allowed to them to regard themselves as privileged…[but in doing so] they embrace concepts that actually do them more

[201] Matory, *Black*, 205.
[202] Caldwell, *Negras*, 74-75.

> harm than good…[while] the possibility that [they] might organize collectively to fight against sexist-racist oppression is reduced.[203]

Does *Colônia* communicate the idea that black women have some sort of sociopolitical power that would consequently excuse the racist-sexist practices that produced the socio-economical ills for which they are also blamed?

While the work does convey a sense of collective strength, the figures hardly seem fortunate or invincible. Due to their small stature, lack of clothing and arms, and literal ties to their labor, Paulino's figurines allude to the severe limitations and injustices imposed on Afro-Brazilian women. The figurines do not look like "superwomen;" rather, they resemble *survivors*. They thus represent bravery, resiliency and pragmatism, aspects which necessarily emerge from the roles black women play in their daily lives to protect and sustain themselves and others.

Moreover, the only figure that appears alone is *Rainha*. Likened to the stereotypical matriarch, she is single and only seemingly in control of her world. Accordingly, she becomes a foil to the *Workers* and *Soldiers*. Her distorted figure does not permit movement or participation in the activity of the colony. Any presumed power she might have could not be enforced while immobile and at such a distance from the group. She can only observe the others and thus, her role in the installation ironically resembles that of slave. Relating *Rainha* to an insect, Paulino stated, “Though the queen

[203] hooks, *Ain’t*, 81.

bee remains at the helm, she is completely dependent on those beneath her. She is the ultimate prisoner."[204]

Rainha serves as a contrast from the *Workers* and *Soldiers* who are literally and figuratively "on the ground." Their placement suggests they are tackling the realities of daily life. Along with spools of threads that refer to their incessant labor, the *Workers* possess eyes making them appear more humanlike, thus humane and perhaps maternal. The *Soldiers* lack eyes, but rather than merely being blind, this quality prevents them from being distracted from their purpose, which is protection of the colony. Their function in the piece also questions heteronormative ideas regarding what type of configuration constitutes a family and how women should behave. *Colônia* therefore demonstrates multiple dimensions of black women, particularly as wives and mothers, as does Carrie Mae Weems in the various photographs and text panels that comprise *The Kitchen Table* series from 1990.

Figure 62: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table* series (details), 1990

[204] Paulino paraphrased in Cleveland, *New Center*, 269.

Like *Colônia*, *The Kitchen Table* reflects the complexity of the various roles and relationships of black women in their personal lives. Weems plays the protagonist, or "the woman" who is presumably a working class wife and mother, in twenty black-and-white photographs, all the action of which takes place around a kitchen table.[205] The series begins with a man leaning over the woman's shoulder as she primps and "breaks the fourth wall." That is, Weems looks into the camera and back at the viewer, disallowing the typical suspension of disbelief in the fiction of a photograph. Emphasized by her grooming, the woman indicates that the series "has the appearance of a documentary, but [is] not all documentary. It [is] a highly fabricated work."[206] Further, while the frames are "not linear at all, they construct something that feels on the surface to be very linear."[207] Weems's next five scenarios with the woman and a male partner thus seem chronological. The second image depicts the couple drinking, smoking and playing cards in perhaps the earlier stages of their relationship. Images of two adults eating dinner, seeming distant at times, but also embracing, follow.

The second image also suggests an earlier time—namely, the Civil Rights era—due to the poster of Malcolm X hanging in the background. Scholars, such as bell hooks, Michele Wallace and Angela Davis have written about how the Black Nationalist movement of the 1960s was often delimiting for black women. By maintaining the patriarchy of U.S. nationalism, the movement appeared to be most concerned with the redemption of black masculinity, rather than "black power." This association with the

[205] Weems stated her "work is very, very class-based. It is working class-based… [and] that reality shapes the pictures—the way the images are constructed." hooks, *Art*, 89.
[206] hooks, *Art*, 81.
[207] hooks, *Art*, 87.

poster might also pertain to Weems's inclusion of a caged bird in the background of the following frame.

Writer Maya Angelou's celebrated autobiographical novel and poem, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" appropriates poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's concept of the caged bird as a captive slave or otherwise oppressed person that "sings of freedom." Although the woman possesses the bird in *Kitchen Table*, the pet appears to serve as an underlying or (literal) background aspect of the women's identity. Its presence suggests her lack of independence in this scene, wherein the woman caresses the man while as they eat a dinner she ostensibly prepared. Similar to many black women's experience as Black Nationalists, the woman becomes trapped, in a sense, by an obligation to support the man.

Figure 60: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table* series (details), 1990

The woman seems to desire a freedom that includes being viewed as a multidimensional character. Weems accordingly removes the bird in subsequent frames and the women's role develops in a variety of ways. The suggestion of this desire comments on the disparity of cinematic or televisual roles between black and white

actresses. Whereas, white actresses have been afforded numerous roles in Hollywood films, some with emotional depth and some without, black actresses have had far less opportunities to play largely formulaic parts that reinforce controlling images, such as the Matriarch. Weems therefore responds by offering her viewer a more multidimensional black female character in the following scenes. For instance, the next image depicts the woman alone and distressed with a telephone that sits in the foreground. She plays out an archetypal scenario in which a woman waits (in vain) for her lover to call. Her friends appear in the next four images to console her, and present various aspects of the group's relationship. Together, they laugh, brood and ultimately care for one another, just as the woman does with her daughter in subsequent scenes.

Figure 61: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table* series (details), 1990

These next five images of the mother and daughter most emphasize the historical role of the kitchen table in African-American culture. Seated around the table, friends and family members (particularly mothers and daughters) often have exchanges that inform and shape their relationships both in and outside of the home. Patricia Hill Collins explains,

> the collective secret knowledge generated by groups…[is] shared in private when…surveillance seems absent…. Drawing on traditional African-American cultures of resistance, conversations around the kitchen table become classrooms of learning about how to deal with oppression.[208]

As Weems demonstrates in these scenes with the daughter, the black mother functions as a teacher while at her kitchen table. Her actions during these moments of work and play are unified by a sense of instruction. Although these interactions are in the privacy of a kitchen, for the daughter, her mother sets an example of how to perform in the public sphere. The working class black mother who has been vilified and used as a scapegoat in the media is now shown as an influential individual. The woman does more than merely give birth to her child; she develops a relationship and imparts necessary knowledge and skills to her daughter throughout these scenes.

Figure 62: Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series* (details), 1990

Finally, Weems introduces the last four frames with an image of the woman looking directly into the camera and back at the viewer. She is alone and leaning over the table and her position indicates again, but more emphatically, that the viewer is also a subject and not the only observer in this scenario. In fact, Weems had Laura Mulvey's famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in mind when she created

[208] Collins, *Fighting*, 49.

Kitchen Table.[209] Mulvey viewed women's roles in films as passive distractions essentially controlled by an active male gaze. Notwithstanding the fact that black women's roles in films are rarely passive and typically portray exaggerated personalities and emotions, Weems counters Mulvey's claim and presents a character that is also a spectator.

The woman seems to be "challenging all of those assumptions about gaze, and also questioning who is in fact looking."[210] With this sense of empowerment, she then goes on to enact various scenes of self-satisfaction. The bird appears again as a metaphor for the woman. This time, the woman feeds the pet, suggesting she is taking care of herself. She appears to further pleasure herself in the next scene, wherein she lies on the table, nude and clutching her hair. In the final frame, appearing rather content, the woman drinks, smokes and plays cards again, but this time, a game of Solitaire.

In these images, Weems visualizes the complexities of a black woman and her family and challenges herself and the viewer to pay "attention to the specificity of race even as we…look beyond race and recognize the multiple concerns presented."[211] Her series reflects her "thinking about whether it might be possible to use black subjects to represent universal concerns."[212] In her efforts to contest essentialist, controlling imagery of black families, Weems's photographs collectively work as a "palimpsest-the slow and painstaking peeling away of layers of signification to allow for multiple

[209] hooks, *Art*, 85.
[210] hooks, *Art*, 85.
[211] hooks, *Art*, 66
[212] hooks, *Art*, 76.

interpretations."[213] By exploring these various perspectives however Weems's series also prompts the question, what exactly is universal?

What seems universal in *Kitchen Table* is not merely the senses of joy, sadness or desire, but rather that they are performed. The intimate scenes around the kitchen table suggest the images are windows into a black woman's reality, but one can argue it is their manufacture that makes them more universal than the storylines. While Weems represents the black family in a documentary manner, she does so through fictitious scenarios, pointing to the ways in which humans (universally) present themselves in particular ways to deal with oppression, navigate everyday life and express their personalities. The text panels, which "rather than explanations or captions,…[are] an ever-changing mix of real conversation, storytelling, internal ruminations, or lyrics *from* a Blues and R&B soundtrack," reinforce the unfixed and intangible nature of the subject as well.[214] Along with the revisions of the woman's role amid shifting characters and situations, they indicate her fluid identity. Again, like a palimpsest, *The Kitchen Table* not only has multiple layers of meaning, but also involved several layers of modifications in its production and display. It raises the question of whether the viewer sees the series as true-to-life glimpses into a black mother's life, or if she (also) sees the work as a process of self-making?

Kitchen Table thus points to not only how the viewers see particular subjects, but also how subjects see themselves. Through the woman's returned gaze and various poses,

[213] Farrington, *Creating*, 213-14.
[214] Friis-Hansen, *From Carrie's*, 10.

Weems marks "the so-called object of the gaze [the woman]…as a site of endless negotiation…. In doing so… [she points] to the gaze itself as reciprocal rather than unilateral in its effects."[215] As an alternative to Mulvey's theoretical scenario of the female objectified by the male gaze, Weems's depiction of the woman in *Kitchen Table* is not submissive or passive; rather, she is self-aware and aware of the viewer. She uses this opportunity to perform for the camera, thus disallowing others' control over her representation. Whereas, in the nineteenth century, "the underlying belief in the veracity of the camera added a potent new political tool…[and] scientific support of the continuation of slavery," among other injustices, *Kitchen Table* suggests Weems's belief in the veracity of the *manipulation* of the camera. Or, in her words, the "interpretation of experience, of make-believe, fiction, storytelling, and folklore…are all part of the truth."[216]

Also aware of the strategies black women adopt as a response to cultural perceptions of them, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins explains how these circumstances also impact middle-class women.

> Images of working-class Black femininity that pivot on a Black women's body politics of bitchiness, promiscuity, and abundant fertility also affect middle-class African American women. In essence, the controlling images associated with poor and working-class Black women become texts of what not to be. To achieve middle-class status, African American women must reject this gender-specific version of authenticity in favor of a politics of respectability. They must somehow figure out a way to become Black "ladies" by avoiding these working-class traps.[217]

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215 Jones, *Self/Image,* 55.
216 Weems quoted in Friis-Hansen, *From Carrie's Kitchen.*
217 Collins, *Black Sexual*, 138-39.

Sheila Pree Bright's series *Suburbia* (2005-07) presents domestic manifestations of these efforts in forty 58 x 48 inch prints of photographs taken over the course of two years in Atlanta, Georgia, a city with a large affluent black population. Each image captures various well-appointed rooms in the homes of an upper class black family. Mostly due to post-WWII "white flight," however, the popular notion of suburbia is a residential area composed of white middle to upper class families.[218] Bright's series thus points to the intersection of race and class as it pertains to geographical space in the U.S. The impact of her series is not derived from the décor or activity in the scenes. Rather, the skin color of unidentifiable occupants and the tacit racialization of household objects thwart viewers' expectations. If the work is to be anything more than a spread in *Architectural Digest*, in addition to socio-economic status, race would have to play a significant role in the collective identity of suburbia.

[218] "White flight" refers to… It is worth mentioning that white flight still exists today. For example, historian Kevin Kruse has stated that in Atlanta, as suburbs became more racially mixed in the 1990s, many wealthy white families began to populate the exurbs.

Figure 63: Sheila Pree Bright, *Untitled 11* (*Suburbia*), 2005-07

Moreover, the framework of *Suburbia* emphasizes the paranoia and fear that lie at the basis of "white flight." The scenes have a voyeuristic feel that comes from their formal composition. For instance, *Untitled 11* looks as though Bright was “casing" the home. She shot the exterior of the house on a rainy day from far across the street and partially behind a bush. Further, in other frames (*Untitled 2, 3, 5, 12* and *18*), the occupants are blurred, concealed or fragmented in views of them reading or taken through reflections in mirrors. Bright’s camera figures as a tool of surveillance capturing a realm of American society that is largely invisible in mainstream media. As if taken by a private investigator, the images resemble snapshots—photographs taken quickly and informally—to be used as evidence of this unknown territory. The large scale of the photographs also heightens the sense of voyeurism and gives the viewer the impression that she is a detective entering these domestic spaces. Lacking the returned gaze of

Weems's protagonist, the design of the scenes in *Suburbia* enhance their realism. The viewer can thus imagine she has gained access to a restricted area.

Figure 64: Sheila Pree Bright, *Untitled 13* (*Suburbia*), 2005-07

Upon entrance, the viewer observes the homeowners' both casual and conscious display of belongings. *Untitled 13*, for instance, is a view of a tastefully decorated foyer. The subtle hues of beige and tan are interrupted by a bright pink Chanel bag that hangs off the banister of a staircase and above a pair of matching high heels. Bright's class identification of her veiled subjects through their furnishings recalls artwork of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement in 1920s Germany. During the Weimar era, several artists—most famously Otto Dix and George Grosz—created portraits that "emphasized the outer reality of the subject… Thus they used the trappings of industrial

capitalism to indicate social class and to suggest the alienation of modern man."[219] While Bright seems less critical of *Suburbia*'s environments, she does rely on the outer reality of the inhabitants—their choice in objects and their arrangements—to act as socio-economical signifiers.

Moreover, these items also function as racial signifiers. The viewer receives occasional "clues" to the racial identity of the occupants in the forms of random objects. Bright thus appears to critically analyze the way race is read through dolls (*Untitled 3* and *6*), toys on a staircase (*Untitled 7*), sculptures on a bookcase (*Untitled 28*) or novelties on a kitchen countertop (*Untitled 34*). As Susan Richmond explains,

> Suburbia also demonstrates that attempts to wrest narratives of identity—racial, familial or otherwise—from photographs require extradiegetic leaps. Resorting to knowledge and experience beyond the image, some of these leaps jarringly expose the viewer's unconscious recourse to racial assumptions…. [The] uncertainty reveals itself to be crucial, as it highlights questions that course through the entire *Suburbia* series: how does racial identity get inscribed in spatial aesthetics? Or in a photographic image? Likewise, why do we, as Coco Fusco asserts, "like to see race even if we don't consider ourselves racist?"[220]

Therefore, when the body, (or perhaps, racial certainty) does appear in *Suburbia*, it effectively remains inaccessible. Similar to Lorna Simpson's "anti-portraits" of the 1990s, which depicted black subjects turned away from the viewer, Bright's images refuse visual consumption of the residents. In fact, *they* are the consumers, as evidenced by the displays of their wealth throughout the series. Rather than figures, the interiors of

[219] Ewers, *Folk-Lorist*, 44.
[220] Richmond, *Shelia.*

Suburbia constitute a “self-conscious performance of class,” one that corresponds to the vintage family portraits in the background of several frames.[221]

bell hooks has written about the significance of family portraits within the black household. They are “critical interventions in the representations of black people in the media…pictorial genealogies of decolonization…[and evidence of the] diversity of body, being and expression” within the black population.[222] That said, the austere portraits of women and children dressed in white that Bright captured in Suburbia also allude to historical middle class concerns of “representing the race,” notably during the early twentieth century. As numerous poor black southerners migrated to northern cities, they were often greeted with the disapproval of middle class black northerners. The latter group of more privileged "New Negroes" strove to subvert stereotypes, which they often believed the activities and appearances of lower class black people perpetuated.[223] As Patricia Hill Collins asserted in the aforementioned quote, these intra-racial conflicts still exist today, as middle class black women must "[negotiate] the complicated politics… [of being] judged within the confines of modern mammies and Black ladies."[224]

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[221] Ibid.

[222] Richmond and hooks qtd in Richmond, *Sheila*.

[223] Popularized during the Harlem Renaissance, the term "New Negro" generally refers to the inspired, hopeful representation of black people (by black people) after Reconstruction and during the Black Migration from Southern rural areas to Northern cities. As Alain Locke wrote in 1925, the New Negro demonstrated that "Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul. There is a fresh spiritual and cultural focusing. We have, as the heralding sign, an unusual outburst of creative expression. There is a renewed race-spirit that consciously and proudly sets itself apart." Locke, *New Negro*, ix.

[224] Collins, *Black Sexual*, 144.

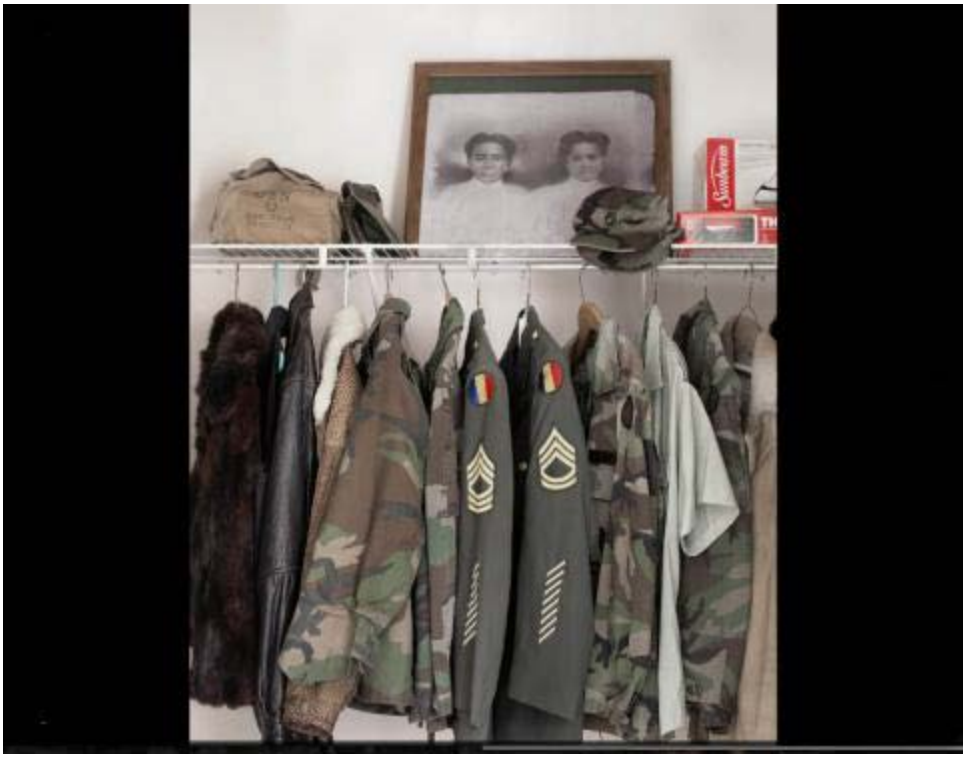

Figure 65: Sheila Pree Bright, *Untitled 27 (Suburbia)*, 2005-07

In many ways, *Untitled 27* implies those conditions. It is a view inside a closet where a vintage black-and-white portrait of two women (in white dresses) sits on a shelf above the clothing rack next to boxes of household appliances and accessories from the armed forces. Several military uniforms hang below, along with fur and leather jackets. Symbols of conformity and discipline are juxtaposed with aspects of luxury and consumption. The image could be read as a psychological portrait of the owners of these items, which are appropriately in the closet. These individuals recognize and perhaps emulate the propriety of their relatives, but they also have the financial means to indulge themselves. Further, the household appliances indicate that they have had to work to acquire and/or retain their social and economic status. Unlike the conventional images of

middle class white women, "middle class black women typically need to work in order to remain middle class; they cannot achieve the status of lady by withdrawing from the workforce."[225] They therefore negotiate the slippery terrains of appearing respectable, exhibiting their wealth and continuing to work to maintain these conditions.

> Despite this inference of psychological drama and historical conflict, there is little evidence of the drama of daily life here. Instead, the banality of suburban life is pictured. These are not typical representations of African American life….The figures are not performing… [and the scenes] do not solicit empathy from viewers…. The quiet subtlety of "Suburbia" can be unremarkable to some viewers and disconcerting for others… [as] white identity… has been historically defined as oppositional to Blackness. [226]

Figure 66: Sheila Pree Bright, *Untitled 12 (Suburbia)*, 2005-07

[225] Collins, *Black Sexual*, 139.
[226] Cooks, *Pictures*.

The un-remarkability of *Suburbia* thus makes the series remarkable. Some black viewers have complained that there are too few indications of African-American heritage or identity in the work.*227 Suburbia* might also upset white viewers who feel secure in notions of their difference from black families. Nonetheless, the inhabitants of this home appear comfortable in their surroundings. In *Untitled 12*, a black female figure, ostensibly the mother, lies on a bed reading an issue of *Business Week*. Although her figure visually contrasts with the headboard and nightstand to "create the diagonals that mitigate the dominant horizontal lines of the furniture…, the upholstery's rich red and gold tones envelop and virtually camouflage her."[228] The enfolding of her body thus becomes a visual affirmation of her association with this lifestyle and setting. Regardless of others' discomfort with the portrayal of her home or her presence in suburbia, she appears at ease.

Despite societal threats to and political backlash against her community of black South African lesbians, Zanele Muholi also aimed to capture this sense of comfort and security in her photographic series *Being* (2006-07). The series comprises nineteen color and black-and-white photographs that portray various aspects of lesbians' relationships in a range of situations. The women pose for the camera or engage in everyday and staged activities, such as fixing their hair, bathing or embracing in bed.

The series also includes *Nomsa Mazibuko and Fondo, outside the Hope Unity Metropolitan Community Church, a gay church, during Good Friday. Mayfair,*

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[227] See Cooks and Richmond. Cooks quotes Bright: "[A book publisher] explained to me that he grew up during the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King, Jr. and that I did not have enough signifiers or clues about African American culture in the work to show that these were African American homes."
[228] Richmond, *Shelia Pree*.

Johannesburg 2007. This image depicts a family of two lesbian parents with their daughter relaxing on a bench outside their church. They are smiling, nicely dressed and seem relaxed. One can infer they are close-knit, as they are tightly grouped together on one side of the bench. As the series' title declares, the image depicts the women simply "being" themselves, or to quote lesbian artist Harmony Hammond, Muholi is

> representing and celebrating women with differing body colors, textures, sizes and shapes; who were young, aging, underweight or overweight, surgically scarred, diseased, or in some way disabled,…allowing us to *picture ourselves as we really are*.[229]

In this sense, these women are at ease *because* they do not subscribe to heteronormative roles. Muholi's image depicts them as a lesbian couple and (partially) refusing gender-based prescriptions of dress and appearance. In particular, Nomsa's short hair and button-down shirt make her appear masculine, yet also comfortable. Her presence underlines her identification as a human *being*, rather than with a predefined social category, which consequently underlines Muholi's intention in creating this series.

[229] Hammond, *Re-membering*, 82.

Figure 67: Zanele Muholi, ***Nomsa Mazibuko and Fondo, outside the Hope Unity Metropolitan Community Church, a gay church, during Good Friday. Mayfair, Johannesburg 2007,*** **2007**

According to Muholi, the "work is aimed at erasing the very stigmatisation of [their] sexualities as 'unAfrican.'"[230] Indeed, in the past decade, several African officials have denounced their homosexual citizenry. In 2000, Dr. Vasu Reddy of South Africa's Human and Social Development Research Program stated,

> Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Federick Chiluba of Zambia, and most recently, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, are in agreement that homosexuality is a "scourge" that defies Christian teachings and African, traditions. The style of condemnation is shared by all: Homosexuality is un-African and against the teachings of the Bible. The threats

[230] Muholi qtd in *Zanele Muholi.*

> too remain; they are couched in a performative and declaratory language: Homosexuals must be arrested and removed from society.[231]

The latter part of his statement mentions the threat of the leaders' rhetoric, thus underlining theorist Monique Wittig's assertion that "there is a multiplicity of languages which constantly act upon the social reality," and her insistence on "the material oppression of individuals by discourses."[232] In her renowned essay, "The Straight Mind," Wittig discusses pornography because it constitutes a discourse of signs that are widespread and that signify the domination of women. In her view,

> discourse is not divorced from the real…. Not only does it maintain very close relations with the social reality, which is our oppression (economically and politically), but also it is in itself real since it is one of the aspects of oppression, since it exerts a precise power over us. The pornographic discourse is part of the strategies of violence, which are exercised upon us: it humiliates, it degrades, it is a crime against our "humanity."[233]

Muholi's artwork demonstrates recognition of the close relations of discourse with reality. In response to verbal discourses that (in)directly encourage discrimination and violence against lesbians, she shapes a visual or photographic discourse. Her images that signify the beauty and normalcy of lesbian relationships visually counter the material oppression and other effects of heteronormative discourses, such as those promulgated by the politicians quoted above. In fact, there is an urgency in Muholi's response because their political rhetoric is one of the major contributors to the ongoing threat of "curative rape."

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[231] Reddy, *Institutionalizing*, 170.
[232] Witting, *The Straight Mind*, 103.
[233] Witting, *The Straight Mind*, 106.

Curative or "'corrective rape' [is] committed by men behind the guise of trying to 'cure' lesbians of their sexual orientation," and often ends in murder.[234] This notion of "curing" lesbians recalls the homophobic myth or discourse within black communities in the U.S. Therapist and educator Sylvia Witts Vitale has recounted sayings, such as "The solution to the lesbian's problem is 'a good fuck.' All she needs supposedly is the right man with the right medicine to straighten her out."[235] Despite the speakers' contexts or intentions, this language is just as "performative and declaratory" as that of the African officials and literally details current situations of sexual violence against lesbians in South Africa. As scholar and activist Barbara Smith has stated, homophobia is "the last oppression to be taken seriously… But it is extremely serious, sometimes to the point of being fatal."236

234 Kelly, Raped and Killed.
235 Vitale, *A Herstorical Look*, 64.
236 Smith, *The Truth*, 112.

Figure 68: Zanele Muholi, *Katlego Mashiloane and Nosipho Lavuta, Ext. 2, Lakeside, Johannesburg 2007*

Further, one can easily relate the statements of lesbians from Johannesburg and Cape Town, for whom the threat of rape has become an everyday ordeal, to Wittig's analysis of the effects of pornographic discourse as a strategy of violence. Wittig views the discourse "as a harassing tactic… a warning. It orders us to stay in line and it keeps those who would tend to forget who they are in step; it calls upon fear."[237] Likewise, Phumla, a black lesbian from Johannesburg, stated, due to violence inspired by homophobic discourse,

> Every day you feel like it's a time bomb waiting to go off…. You don't have freedom of movement; you don't have space to do as you please. You are always scared and your life always feels restricted. As women and as lesbians we need to be very aware that it is a fact of life that we are always in danger.[238]

Muholi therefore wanted to document "'[her] people' before [they] are no more," but without a sense of the impending doom her statement conveys.[239] *Being* hardly contains a sense of danger of fear. All the subjects appear safe, secure and often content. Muholi's reliance on the photographic medium to achieve her goal is notable not only for its capacity to propose reality or a truth to the viewer, but also to interrogate others' past reliance on the "veracity of the camera." Photographs of black African women have historically been used to document their supposed alterity and legitimize others' authority over their bodies. In *Being*, the images seem less like instances of Muholi's control or direction over her subjects and more as self-representations of her peers. They

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[237] Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 106.
238 Kelly, Raped and Killed.
[239] *Zanele Muholi*.

> subvert the authority of that [anthropological] tradition by allowing the subjects to speak: by participating in the photographic process, perhaps choosing their clothes, pose, or event the final images; by returning the gaze back of the viewer."[240]

Figure 69: Zanele Muholi*, Apinda Mpako and Ayanda Magudulela, Parktown, Johannesburg 2007*

Moreover, by utilizing photography, Muholi naturalizes these largely idealized representations. As Jan Zita Grover asserts, idealization serves an important function for subcultural communities. It fulfills "their need…to see their own communities represented as they wished them to be."[241] This form of representation therefore does not necessarily simplify the lives depicted; rather, it is an act of remembering and forgetting.

> Countercultural or subcultural positive images propose a complex 'forgetting' of present realities—a resistance to, say, the painful realities of war, powerlessness or poverty and 'remembering' of possible alternatives: peace, security and affluence. Thus it is naive or very cynical—to dismiss positive images as merely

[240] Hammond, *Re-membering*, (79)
[241] Grover, *Framing the Questions*, 487.

> sentimental or old-fashioned. To do so is to treat them as if they proposed no arguments, embodied no aspirations, reflected no ongoing struggles.[242]

In this sense, the conventional style of Muholi's portrait of a lesbian family reflects the legitimation, recognition and normalcy that the subjects desire. In reference to black South African lesbians, psychologist Cheryl-Ann Potgieter explained, “Motherhood [is] a regular occurrence within their context as women and it contributed to them being ‘ordinary,’ everyday women.” In addition, law professor Nancy Polikoff has written, for some lesbians "motherhood may be almost politically reactionary; a way to appear normal.”[243] This tactic does not discount these women's love for their family, and it is similar to heterosexual individuals that believe they should get married and have children. Just as single heterosexuals would rather not face questions and confront stereotypes of their family and friends regarding their marital status, black lesbian mothers might also want to dispel false notions about their relationships. In particular, lesbian parenthood affirms that "[homo]sexuality does not threaten the continuation of black families" and they are not "being selfish and looking out for their pleasure when the birth of a new nation is at stake."244

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[242] Grover, *Framing the Questions*, 488.
[243] Nancy Polkoff qtd in Gunning, *A Story*, 160.
[244] hooks and Witts-Vitale

Figure 70: Zanele Muholi*, Julia and "Mandoza" Hokwana, Lakeside, Johannesburg 2007*

Muholi's depiction of lesbian motherhood further demonstrates the diversity of South Africa's lesbian community, as it is the only image in the series that portrays a family. The viewer might expect *Being* to be a depiction of a united front of South African lesbians, but the work is formally disjunctive as a whole. The images are in color and black-and-white, in different styles and tones, and shot from various angles. The lack of uniformity and the individualized, descriptive titles underlines the heterogeneity of this community. Muholi's approach to the project recalls a concern of Reddy in his discussion of gay pride marches in South Africa. He states,

> Queers may have positioned themselves in a space to deploy the power of representing identity and unity as a form of consciousness raising for the queer community. Yet even as I acknowledge this point, a further weariness sets in. Is a common front or political alliance of queers not a contradictory enterprise? If we acknowledge that sexual orientation is only a symptom of more deep-rooted

> differences, is the notion of a united lobby not evidence of a refusal to acknowledge the disparities and divisions in South African queer communities?[245]

Those "disparities and divisions" surface on various levels, and particularly in terms of gender, race and class. Because representations of homosexuals have been scarce in popular culture and social histories, one often associates a certain type of person with the term lesbian, and she is rarely a black, working class mother.246 This circumstance also means that subcultural groups often actively police the self-representations of their members. However, this approach delimits the expressions of the group and prevents the multiplicity of images and identities from which dominant cultures benefit. Thus, despite the scarcity of lesbian imagery, *Being* allows one to view a range of social and physical types that fall under the rubric of black South African lesbian. The series therefore raises not only this community's consciousness, but also broadens that of viewers outside the group.

ILLNESS AS METAPHOR

In Potgieter's essay on black lesbian motherhood she also notes,

> None of the participants [in her survey] raised the issue of artificial insemination in becoming mothers and thus "bypassing" the sexual act with a man. One possible reason for not referring to modern reproductive technology is not because they are necessarily against technology, but because in South Africa health services accessible to Black women are limited and the focus is on primary healthcare. Thus, because of the lack of options, any discourse that allows

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[245] Reddy, *Institutionalizing*,

[246] Barbara Smith has also written, "'Gay' means gay white men with large discretionary incomes, period. Perceiving gay people in this way allows one to ignore that some of us are women *and* people of color *and* working class *and* poor *and* disabled *and* old." *The Truth*, 113.

> motherhood without having heterosexual sex does not have the space to emerge.[247]

This passage touches on the biosocial limitations imposed upon black women's reproduction in the African Diaspora that artworks by Rosana Paulino and Wangechi Mutu reflect. These works also mark a notable shift in mediums from the three previous ones. Weems, Bright and Muholi aptly utilized the presumed veracity of photography to document realistic scenarios, actual residences and personal relationships, respectively. Conversely, Paulino and Mutu addressed subjects related to reproduction, clinical procedures and medical experimentation via drawings and collages (superimposed on drawings). The crafted nature of these practices lends themselves to visualizations of bodies that have been impaired and manipulated. *Diário da Doença* (*Illness Diary*), a suite of text-based drawings by Paulino from 1999, chronicles a personal experience of this sort; however, the work also resonates with the concerns of a vast amount of women of the African Diaspora.

Paulino executed the drawings as a form of catharsis before an operation due to sudden health problems.[248] Underlined by a limited palette – whites, browns, black and specks of red – Paulino's stark narrative and imagery evokes a horror film. Accompanying a fitfully drawn, armless, nude torso with enflamed genitalia, the text of the first image reads, "Yesterday I discovered something strange growing inside of my body. The doctors are going to operate on me soon." Next, a uterus sprouting branchlike projections hovers under the line, "They laid seeds, they took root." Another image

[247] Potgieter, *Black South*, 146-47.
[248] http://rosanapaulino.blogspot.com

features a female figure and the uterus, which is now black and extends its "roots" over and into the body. The accompanying text reads, "They appeared suddenly, taking root throughout my body, spreading wildly, without control." Paulino finally writes, "Like an alien, it took over of my body," with a depiction of the blackened uterus engulfing the now-headless female figure.[249]

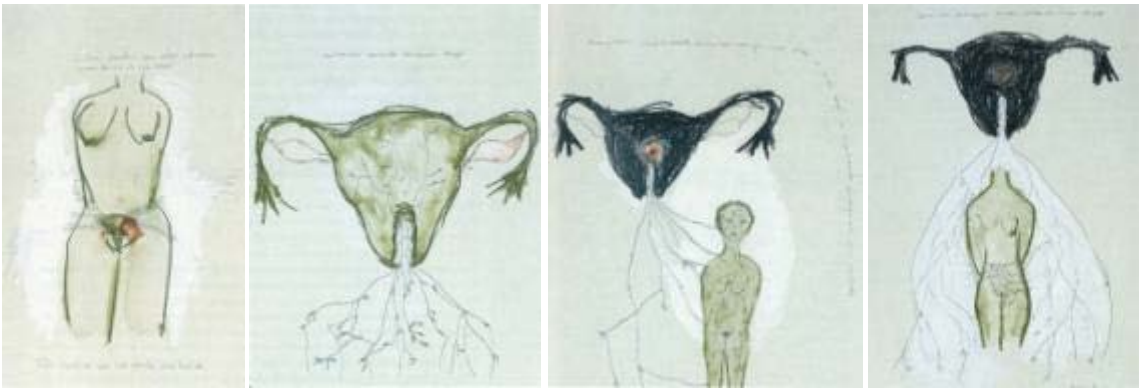

Figure 71: Rosana Paulino, *Diário da Doença* (*Illness Diary*), 1999

In addition to the ominous text, the images' fractured lines convey the stressful nature of the circumstances under which they were executed. Likewise, the exaggerated distortion of the forms gives the work a psychological charge that suggests Paulino's illness also functions as a metaphor, possibly of the effects that result from the denigration of black fertility in Brazil. In particular, the uterus becomes black as it casts its net of disease onto Paulino's figure. Further, the visual extraction of the womb alludes to some form of sterilization, a medical procedure into which poor black Brazilian women are often coerced. Thus, the ambiguous nature of the text and imagery allows for a more expansive reading of the artwork.

[249] The text in the artworks is in Portuguese. These quotes are my translations.

Paulino's series implies the ramifications of the “disease” do not affect only the uterus; they also do psychological and socio-cultural damage. Lacking arms and head, Paulino’s figure appears unable to protect or think for herself. The ominous vision of her headless form overtaken by the womb suggests she experienced a loss of control over her own body. Due to cultural perceptions that render black women vulnerable in the Brazilian healthcare system, in a sense, the "something strange” that the doctors are inclined to remove is possibly Paulino's capacity to procreate and presumably her sense of sovereignty.

As Sônia Beatriz dos Santos explains, "Black women's sexuality and reproduction have been represented as abnormal, in need of medical intervention by the state, and as social threats that require state regulation."[250] Much like images of the Welfare Queen and the crack-addicted black mother in the U.S., negative imagery of black mothers in Brazil, as a whole, have real-world, material effects on individuals.

Santos continues,

> Negative representations that depict Black females as sexually uncontrollable, helpless, and negligent mothers should be taken as a critical and serious concern when we evaluate the well-being of Black women during pregnancy and child-bearing. These images dehumanize Black women and render them more vulnerable to experiencing discrimination and violence in the healthcare system. In Brazil’s cultural and social imaginary the figure of the pregnant Black woman is very often associated to the images of Black women as sexually immoral and bad mothers and such association have put them at great risk. We can see these effects in the high rates of Black female morbidity and mortality in the country.[251]

[250] Santos, *Brazilian*, 114.
[251] Santos, *Brazilian*, 115.

Paulino's series is illustrative of this morbidity and mortality of black Brazilian women by means of fragmented forms. The body is never seen as a complete entity. Arms are missing or hidden. The legs are cropped, and the uterus becomes detached. Even the head disappears in one scene. However, Paulino's sections also reiterate Hal Foster's view of the shift in artmaking in the 1990s. In 2000, he observed,

> An insistence on the missing and the maudite was present in much dissident art and philosophy of the twentieth century that challenged the official ideals of aesthetic completion, symbolic totality, dialectical assimilation, and the like. …Whether conceived in terms of the heterogeneous (as in Georges Bataille), the traumatic real (as in Lacan), the abject (as in Julia Kristeva), or the inhuman (as in Lyotard), this motive drove many different practices in the 1990s, which faced new totalities (like cyber virtuality and global capitalism) to resent, perhaps to resist.[252]

Paulino's *Diário* does convey a sense of resentment for her situation due to its representation as monstrous and invasive. Nonetheless, *Diário* functions even more effectively as a form of social commentary, as the work depicts her figure as divided into two entities—body and womb—that are in opposition. The encounter in which the womb overtakes the body suggests the challenges that black women face as they strive for reproductive freedom and justice. In particular, Paulino's scenes recall two specific themes of their struggles on which scholars of this topic have focused.

The female figure that appears diminished in relation to her womb calls to mind the shrinking black population due to sterilization and high infant mortality rates. Social psychologist Edna Roland noted,

[252] Foster, *An Art*.

> Brazil's black population, rather than becoming the majority, is shrinking… Contributing to that decline were birth-control programs that targeted the Northeast [where black people make up 71 percent of the population] throughout the 1980s…. More recent studies have [also] demonstrated that the Northeast continues to have the highest rates of sterilization,…an unimaginable figure of 62.9 percent of all women using some contraceptive method [in 1991].253

Anthropologist Kia Lily Caldwell also observed, in Brazil, "The drop in fertility happened in total disrespect to women's reproductive rights, women were induced to surgical sterilization without other contraceptive options being made available."[254]

Likewise, in the U.S., politicians have made a series of efforts to reduce black women's fertility as a means to also reducing welfare budgets. According to sociologist Patricia H. Collins,

> Norplant was marketed to poor inner-city Black teenagers…. Depo Provera as a birth control shot was also heavily marketed to women who seemingly could not control their fertility and needed medical intervention to avoid motherhood. Finally, welfare legislation that threatens to deny benefits to additional children is designed to discourage childbearing….[As] safe, legal abortion is difficult for poor women to obtain, the "choice" of permanent sterilization makes sense.255

Further, the visual dominance of Paulino's uterus in her drawings recall the insurgence of political rhetoric regarding fetal rights since the 1970s. As cultural studies scholar Doris Witt avers,

> We have increasingly become accustomed to treating the bodies of pregnant women as having value only in relation, and in subordination, to the body of the zygote, embryo, or fetus they carry. [However punishment for fetal endangerment stems] far more from a cultural imperative to control impoverished women of color than from one to ensure the health and safety of their children.256

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253 Roland, *The Soda Cracker*, 200-01
254 Caldwell, *Negras*, 163.
255 Collins, *Black Sexual*. 133.
256 Witt, *What (N)ever Happened*, 252-3.

In fact, legal scholar Dorothy Roberts has traced the legacy of these punitive responses back to abusive slavery practices. She recounts,

> slave owners would whip pregnant slaves by forcing them "to lie down in a depression in the ground while they were whipped. This procedure allowed the masters to protect the fetus while abusing the mother." Such brutality serves …"as a powerful metaphor for the evils of a fetal protection policy that denies the humanity of the mother."257

Although Brazilian officials typically obscure this issue (and compound the struggles of black feminists) by referring to class, rather than racial, categories, Paulino's *Diário* thus recognizes the differences between feminisms of white women and women of color regarding reproduction.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to combat the root of those ignored, yet impactful, differences. That is, "categories [of race, gender and sexuality] have to be deconstructed from the domain of biology, and analyzed as social and/or cultural constructed realities."[258] Paulino's excision of her uterus in *Illness Diary* serves as a visual deconstruction of naturalized gender roles of the female as an inevitable mother. At the same time, if one reads Paulino's black(ened) uterus as a reference to her ethno-racial category, this aspect also comments on racist views that fear this role assigned to a black female.

Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu also visualizes fears, but presumably those of her own, in twelve collages made between 2004 and 2005. Each piece marries a Victorian

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257 Dorothy Roberts qtd in Witt, *What (N)ever Happened*, 253.
258 Santos, *Brazilian*, 318.

medical illustration with magazine cutouts. Specifically, Mutu used the drawings as a foundation for her application of disparate images of eyes, tongues, noses, legs and ears. She constructed fearsome, yet fascinating, pictures—much like the drawings from which they emerge—adorned with a diverse array of materials, such as glitter, packing tape and fur. One can also identify a significant aspect of Mutu's subject matter by her use of diagrams that portray ailments of female sexual organs only—uterine cancer, ovarian cysts, cervical hypertrophy, and so on—and photographs taken of black women exclusively.

Figure 72: Wangechi Mutu, *Ectopic Pregnancy*, 2004

The combination of Victorian-era medicine and black female bodies recalls the historical experimentation upon black women that continues in the present-day U.S., primarily due to

> the absence of a national health insurance, [which] means that many African American women receive their basic health care from public health clinics and county hospitals. The other historical source of health care is the university research hospital. Most of the major university hospitals in the country are located in economically distressed areas. For centuries, marginalized groups have served the medical establishment as disease models, guinea pigs and cadavers.[259]

The root of this situation is in medical practices during the slavery era, such as those performed by J. Marion Sims, M.D. in his crude backyard hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. There, the bodies of female slaves physically supported the development of gynecological medicine.

Health educator Terri Kapsalis has written on the surgical experiments of Sims, also known as the Father of American Gynecology, who owed his reputation to the slave women he used as subjects. Due to the women's status as property, Sims eventually mastered the successful reparation of fistulas—"small tears that form between the vagina and urinary tract or bladder that cause urine to leak uncontrollably"—from which many black and white women suffered at that time.[260] The development of his medical practice therefore reinforced the slavery system, as it was economically dependent on black women's procreation. Further, he "set a precedent for the medical institution's

[259] Barbee, *Health*, 194.
[260] Kapsalis, *Mastering*, 263.

involvement in racist, eugenicist practices concerned with the reproductive capacities of poor women of color."[261] After Emancipation and in the current

> welfare state economy, reproductive technologies to foster pregnancy are often marketed at wealthy, predominantly white women, whereas new technologies aimed at limiting reproduction are most often used experimentally on poor women of color….[262]

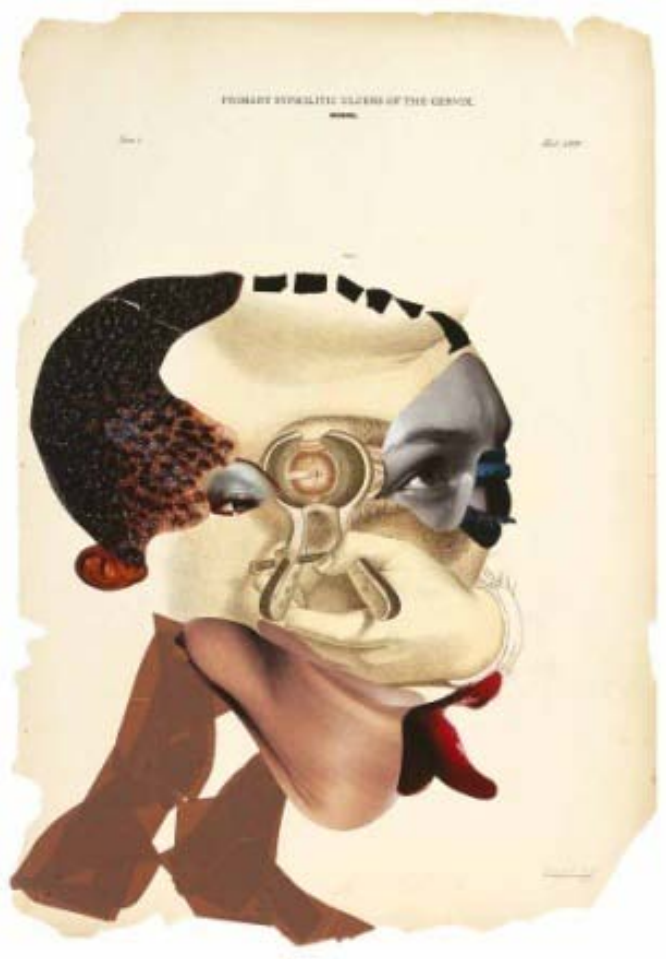

Figure 73: Wangechi Mutu, *Primary Syphilitic Ulcers of the Cervix*, 2005

[261] Kapsalis, *Mastering*, 264.
[262] ibid.

This practice extends to Mutu's native country and other so-called developing nations, where contraceptive drugs are often indiscriminately given to women without adequate medical examinations. Further, drugs deemed unsafe by the Federal Drug Administration and subsequently banned in the U.S. are later distributed in Africa, Southern Asia and Latin America as a covert form of population control.[263] Many Kenyan women take these medications believing they will work as described (on packages that lacks the warnings stated on those in U.S.) only to develop severe or fatal health complications, such as those illustrated in Mutu's series.[264]

In particular, many of Mutu's visual fragments resemble either prosthetic or amputated limbs, underlining their allusion to the careless harm of many African women. Steven Mosher, president of the Population Research Institute, notes,

> Bangladeshi women who had received Norplant suffered side-effects much more serious than those admitted by Norplant's proponents: continuous bleeding, heavier than a normal menses, weakness in the limbs, severe pain and, significantly, blurred or double vision…. [Due to] powerful steroid-based contraceptives… [Kenyan women] have blood clots, liver problems, and problems with bleeding. In Africa where tropical diseases already cause women to be weak with poor blood levels, when they start bleeding irregularly or continuously because of these contraceptives, you literally reduce them to

[263] Mosher, *Reproductive* and Kapsalis, *Mastering*, 290. In his article, Steven Mosher explains, "After the FDA in 1970 declared high-estrogen birth-control pills to be unsafe, the pharmaceutical companies were left with warehouses full of the now-unmarketable contraceptive. Syntex executives offered to sell USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] their entire stock at a heavily discounted price, an offer that USAID's Office of Population, less concerned about safety than in checking fertility cheaply, was only too happy to accept."

[264] Mosher, *Reproductive*. Mosher explains, "On its website, the manufacturer of Depo-Provera prominently lists a number of serious complications that can be caused by the drug, including "delay in spontaneous abortion," "fetal abnormalities," "thrombotic disorder" (blood clots), "ocular disorders" ("a sudden partial or complete loss of vision"), and "lactation" (the passing of the drug through breast milk to nursing infants). The Depo-Provera packaging designed by the population controllers for unsuspecting Kenyan women, however, contains no such off-putting warnings."

> cripples…. These women walk around with difficulty because of anemia, with swollen legs, with livers damaged.[265]

The seemingly haphazard placement of body parts in the collages emphasizes the unpredictability of side effects and the indiscriminate distribution of contraceptives to African women. As these women "do not even have competent medical check-ups before injection," and are often already in poor health, these drugs become even more dangerous than usual for them.[266] The freakish, disordered appearance of Mutu's works thus likens them to the extreme, abnormal conditions from which the women needlessly suffer.

[265] Mosher and Stephen Karanja qtd in *Reproductive*.
[266] Karanja, *Population*.

Figure 74: Wangechi Mutu, *Cancer of the Uterus*, 2005

As fantastical as their appearance might seem, in terms of their formal properties, the collages also bring "about the destruction of the illusionist means and effects" typical of painting.[267] As Clement Greenberg stated, in reference to Cubist collages, the "denial of illusion" from collage

> called attention to the physical reality of the work of art and made that reality the same as the art….[Furthermore,] because it generally fixed the eye at the physical

[267] Greenberg, *The Collected*, 260.

> surface, collage…emphasized the identity of the picture as a flat, and more or less abstract pattern rather than a representation.[268]

Mutu's work generates the same effect; however, the content of the imagery she used to construct her physical surfaces also highlights other levels of "literal reality itself."[269] Her collages deny the illusions of "success" from unwarranted scientific experiments and medical treatments on poor women of color. As opposed to the inherent anonymity of the medical diagrams and patients in medical studies, Mutu visualizes the black women behind these scenes.

[268] Greenberg, *The Collected*, 260-61.
[269] Greenberg, *The Collected*, 260.

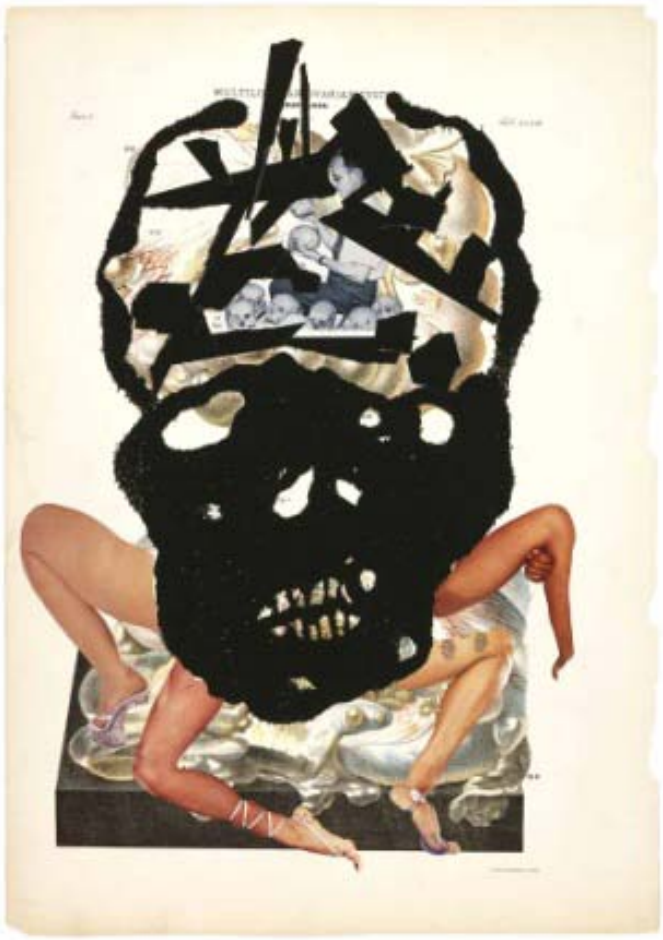

Figure 75: Wangechi Mutu, *Ovarian Cysts*, 2005

Fittingly, their bodies emerge from flat (read decontextualized) pictures. Mutu notably transforms the uteruses into creatures with faces. The nameless original scientific renderings become specific. Notwithstanding their bizarre appearance, these figures appear to be complete, individualized beings. They not only have faces, but Mutu also assigns them racialized bodies, making them less scientifically, and more socially, significant. The texture and depth of their surfaces suggest constructions of bodies and

furthermore identities. As art historian Soraya Murray avers, "[Mutu's] works locate the battlefront of identity on the surface of the female body."[270]

Indeed, the deformed appearances of Mutu's figures do conjure up the effects of a war, whether cultural or military. Nonetheless, by placing the constructed bodies on top of relics from the Victorian era, Mutu proposes them as counterpoints to outdated ideologies and ways of seeing. While the beings might appear disfigured to twenty-first century eyes, they might also represent a population due to emerge in the future. Because of the atrocities of war and misuses of science, their forms suggest that much is unknown about what current conditions might produce. The neglect of certain dominant groups could engender their own doom by fostering beings like those depicted by Mutu.

While one might view them as embattled victims, Mutu's creatures also figure as futuristic mutants. Like her materials, Mutu's imagery therefore has a two-sided nature. In addition to the decimation of black female bodies, these collages also illustrate "figures empowered by their survivalist adjustment to atrocity, made immune and 'improved' by horror and being victims."[271] As in the artwork by Paulino, Weems, Bright and Muholi, Mutu's series does not merely dwell on the misfortunes of black women; it offers the viewer an alternate view of realities that are often ignored, unmentioned and unexpected.

[270] Murray, *Africaine*, 92.
[271] *Wangechi Mutu*.

Conclusion

In addition to highlighting the ways black women are viewed in various locations across the globe, another major purpose of this paper was to look at art as an interdisciplinary practice. It often seems as though art does not have the same weight in academia and society as other disciplines. As discussed above, it nonetheless engages with urgent social, cultural and political issues, issues that stem from ways of seeing black women that many artists' practices have historically reinforced. Their visualizations have been lauded by critics and historians on formal grounds; however, there are unlimited ways of interpreting artworks.

Whether negative or positive, it is precisely the fact that an artwork generates multiple views that it demands a range of interpretations. By not acknowledging the socio-cultural dimensions of works, historians delimit the power, import and influence of visual art. The black women artists featured in this paper recognize these effects. They have resisted earlier portrayals, and re-presented that subject matter and themselves in response. They have also envisioned (revolutionary) possibilities, but have not comprised their aesthetic concerns while doing so. Indeed, it is because of their abilities to impact the viewer and draw her into their artwork that the social aspects of their imagery emerge more complex and effectively.

In particular, the diverse nature of Rosana Paulino's practice reflects the myriad aspects of the black female experience in Brazil, and negates the notions of fixity that controlling images of black sexuality, labor and motherhood allege. As the title of this paper declares, Paulino's art does "damage control." Along with Lorna Simpson, Wangechi Mutu, Xaviera Simmons, Zanele Muholi, and numerous other black women

artists, past and present, she rectifies views of the black woman both in and outside the white cube.

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